Emancipatory Potential of Female Digital Entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan Context.

By

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and have conformed to the regulations on the use and declaration of Generative AI, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I hereby certify that no Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) tools have been used in the creation of the thesis.

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Date: 25.11.25

Dedication

To my mother. The woman who has shaped me with her courage, sacrifices, and silent wisdom. Although she cannot read this dissertation written in English, every page of it bears her imprint.

Acknowledgments

As I reach one of the key milestones of my PhD Journey, I would like to look back on the journey and express my gratitude to the amazing individuals who have helped me in numerous ways throughout this challenging yet incredible journey.

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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ATW	Attitude towards Women
AVE	Average Variance Extracted
BPO	Business Process Outsourcing
BSRI	Bem Sex Role Inventory
CMB	Common Method Bias
DEI	Digital Entrepreneurial Intention
DSE	Digital Self-efficacy
EI	Economic Instability
FDE	Female Digital Entrepreneurship
FinS	Need for Financial Success
FIS	Formal Institutional Support
FS	Family Support
GEM	Global Entrepreneurship Monitor
GRAMMS	Good Reporting of a Mixed Methods Study
GT	Grounded Theory
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IDTGIT	Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT
Ind	Need for Independence
Inn	Need for Innovation
IoT	Internet of Things
IS	Information Systems
KPO	Knowledge Process Outsourcing
MLMV	Measured Latent Marker Variable
MSMEs	Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises
PWE	Previous Work Experience
RCTP	Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice
Rec	Need for Recognition
RM	Role Model
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises

SR	Need for Self-realisation
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TA	Thematic Analysis

Presentations and Scholarly Engagements

- Perera, I.S., McAdam, M. and Connolly, R. (2022), A Critical exploration of the Emancipatory Potential of digitalisation for women's entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context, *DCU Business School Doctoral Colloquium 2022*, 12th May, Dublin City University, Ireland.
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- Perera, I. S., McAdam, M. and Connolly, R. (2025). Emancipatory Journey of Female Digital Entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka: Exploring the Factors Influencing Women in Digital Entrepreneurship. *The European Academy of Management's Annual Conference (EURAM) 2025,* 12th June2025.
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Abstract

Emancipatory Potential of Female Digital Entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan Context.

Irosha Perera

Given that women in patriarchal societies face structural barriers hindering their participation in entrepreneurship, it is imperative to explore women's engagement in entrepreneurship, navigating these barriers. The proliferation of digital technologies marks transformative changes in the entrepreneurial landscape and offers critical crossroads for women to engage in entrepreneurial businesses. Thus, recently scholars have started investigating the emancipatory potential of female digital entrepreneurship, which has received limited academic attention thus far. Bridging the gaps in extant literature, the primary focus of this PhD study is an exploration of the emergence of digital entrepreneurship as a liberating pathway for women in developing economies in the South Asian region.

To attain a holistic understanding, first, the factors that drive women to disrupt the status quo and participate in digital entrepreneurship were investigated. To identify these factors, Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT (IDTGIT) was extended to the arena of female digital entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the research drew on the theoretical lens of intersectionality to investigate how gender intersects with other social ascriptions that may affect women's pathways to emancipation. The Digital Affordances concept was also drawn upon to explain how women use digital technologies. Second, the study focused on critically exploring changes in the broader social order activated through women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship.

The study was conducted utilising a sequential mixed methods approach. Initially five informal interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to attain a broader understanding about how digital entrepreneurship takes place at the grassroot level. Then using a survey of 159 female digital entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka, the hypothesized relationships were empirically tested. Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 female digital entrepreneurs to further explore the phenomenon.

The integrated findings showcase emancipation as a two-way interaction where contextual factors shape women's participation in digital entrepreneurship and how their endeavours result in change in the broader socio-cultural context. It was found that women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship is shaped by **environmental influences**; **individual influences; and personal demographics**. Furthermore, women who start and run businesses by utilising digital technologies were found to activate broader social change which result in legitimisation of female digital entrepreneurship. Even though there were some instances where women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship led to reinforcing the patriarchal norms, the positive changes remain significant. Overall, this research contributes a comprehensive model on digital entrepreneurship as emancipation which can be utilised as a framework for future research.

Chapter One

Introduction and Overview

Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

1.1 Overview of the Dissertation

Female entrepreneurship has been praised not only for fostering economic growth but also for enhancing social well-being (Vossenberg, 2013; Harrison, Leitch, and McAdam, 2020; Ughetto et al., 2020). Despite these favourable outcomes, female entrepreneurs face challenges compared to their male counterparts (Welter, 2004; Sundermeier, Wessel, and Davidson, 2018; Harrison, Leitch, and McAdam, 2020). This is especially true of female entrepreneurs from socio-economically constrained patriarchal contexts (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Panda, 2018; Heeks et al., 2021). Despite this paradox, female entrepreneurs have been identified as the fastest-growing segment of entrepreneurs in the world (Cardella, Hernández-Sánchez and Sánchez-García, 2020). Existing literature focuses on barriers affecting female entrepreneurship, with limited focus on understanding how women navigate such challenges (Stead, 2017; Langevang, Hansen and Rutashobya, 2018; Semkunde *et al.*, 2022). Thus, to better understand female entrepreneurship and explore its full potential, it is imperative to focus beyond barriers and explore how female entrepreneurs navigate challenges.

Recently, digital technologies have emerged as crucial pathways that enable women to overcome obstacles and actively engage in entrepreneurial ventures, showcasing the transformative potential of these tools (Ughetto et al., 2020; Kelly and McAdam, 2022; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023). With the proliferation of digital technologies, the landscape of entrepreneurship has significantly evolved, giving rise to new forms of agency and opportunity. This shift has fostered the emergence of a new segment of female entrepreneurship, which is recognised as female digital entrepreneurship (FDE). Given the lack of a definitional consensus regarding FDE which is a field that is still emerging in scholarly discourse the researcher reviewed existing definitions related to the broader disciplines of female entrepreneurship and digital entrepreneurship and synthesized them to formulate a working definition for the purposes of this study. By integrating the definition of digital entrepreneurship provided by Hull et al. (2007, p. 293), which describes it as a "subcategory of entrepreneurship in which some or all of what would be physical in a traditional organization has been digitized," with Jennings and Brush's (2013)

definition of women's entrepreneurship as the process whereby women initiate and/or run their own businesses, female digital entrepreneurship (FDE) was defined. FDE was understood as the process through which women initiate and manage new businesses that utilize digital technologies to transform or replace traditional physical elements of organizational operations.

The FDE has recently gained recognition as a transformative avenue for women's liberation, sparking a surge of academic inquiry into FDE as an emancipatory pathway (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Ughetto et al., 2020; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). Building an academic dialogue related to this emancipatory potential of FDE necessitates a clear understanding of what emancipation is. Even though in academic literature, the concepts of empowerment and emancipation are frequently discussed in tandem; it is essential from an academic perspective to delineate the distinctions between them. Based on the extant literature, the notion of emancipation can be defined as a comprehensive process of liberation and systemic change that involves setting an entity free from controlling, restrictive, or dominating structures (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009; Susen, 2015; Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018) and empowerment can be described as the increase in individuals' capacity to make informed and strategic decisions regarding their lives in situations where such opportunities were previously restricted (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018; Trivedi and Petkova, 2022). Thus, it is evident that emancipation fundamentally differs from empowerment. Empowerment focuses on developing individual capacities to act successfully within existing power systems, while emancipation necessitates a critical analysis of power that generates resistance aimed at subverting those systems. Therefore, exploration of the emancipatory potential of FDE should go beyond the mere individual level changes, and deeper scholarly exploration is required to enlarge and thicken the understanding of whether and how women entrepreneurs leverage new digital technologies in the creation and conduct of new ventures, and to detect how their actions change in the broader social order. Given that emancipation is relative to the existing status quo, it is essential to investigate emancipatory entrepreneurship by considering the context, as the oppression experienced by individuals is context-embedded (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). Within this backdrop, this study particularly focuses on the emancipatory potential of FDE in Sri Lanka, a country that presents unique contextual conditions.

Like many other South Asian countries, Sri Lankan culture is shaped by strong patriarchal gender norms, and political and economic instabilities are common (Banu, 2016; Panda, 2018). However, women are making significant advancements in many realms in contemporary Sri Lanka compared to other South Asian countries, particularly in terms of health, education, and workforce engagement-related indicators (Banu, 2016). This advancement, alongside the persistent prevalence of stereotypes, creates dilemmas for women regarding their career choices. While improvements in gender parity facilitated greater opportunities for women in Sri Lanka, the enduring stereotypes surrounding gender roles often hinder their ability to pursue diverse career paths confidently. Consequently, women may find themselves navigating complex tensions between societal expectations and their career aspirations. For instance, Sri Lankan women are tasked with striking a precarious balance between engaging in income-generating activities that were traditionally reserved for men and fulfilling the culturally prescribed roles of 'good women' (Hewamanne, 2020; De Silva et al., 2021; Adikaram and Razik, 2025). This dual expectation, coupled with political and economic instabilities, creates a distinct context for women in Sri Lanka to engage in careers such as digital entrepreneurship, which are recognized as male-dominated areas.

The study explores the processes by which digital entrepreneurship leads to the emancipation of women in a resource-constrained, patriarchal context. According to Alkhaled and Berglund (2018), exploring the emancipatory process requires more than individuals trying to challenge and disrupt the existing social orders and dominant ideologies. Attaining a holistic understanding of entrepreneurship as an emancipatory pathway requires exploring how one could break free from the extant constraints and propel change in the social structures to create more conducive conditions for women to engage in digital entrepreneurship (Trivedi and Petkova, 2022; Atarah and Nolan, 2023). Therefore, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, the study focuses on how women overcome the existing constraints that limit their engagement in digital entrepreneurship, which is often perceived as a male-dominated field, and how women contribute to a positive change in the social order through their participation in digital entrepreneurship. The research revolves around three main research objectives: exploring the factors that drive Sri Lankan women to engage in Female Digital Entrepreneurship (FDE),

investigating how intersectional differences influence women's participation in FDE, and examining the transformative changes enabled through FDE.

To achieve these objectives, the study employed a sequential mixed-methods approach. The study comprises three stages: Stage One includes informal exploratory expert interviews, Stage Two consists of a quantitative study-based survey, and Stage Three includes a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews. Stage one of the study attempts to understand how FDE functions in the Sri Lankan (SL) context, as it is a relatively novel phenomenon in the country. It also focuses on understanding the practical challenges the researcher could face when conducting the study. In Stage Two, the survey examines the factors that drive women to engage in FDE, despite the double-gender bind and the intersectional differences that impact women's participation in FDE. The researcher developed a conceptual framework grounded in the extant literature to achieve these objectives. The framework was predominantly based on the Individual Differences Theory of Gender & IT (IDTGIT) (Trauth, 2002; Trauth, Quesenberry, and Morgan, 2004; Trauth and Connolly, 2021) and Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Constructs under three categories, environmental, individual influences, and individual identity, are recognised as factors influencing FDE. Stage three of the study involves an in-depth examination of the diverse range of factors influencing women's engagement in FDE, as well as an analysis of the impact of intersectionality on the FDE journey. Furthermore, it focuses on the social changes brought about through women's engagement in FDE. In addition to the theories of IDTGIT and intersectionality, other theories, such as the role congruity theory of prejudice and digital affordances, were also used to understand how broader factors in the context influence female digital entrepreneurial participation and how FDE can activate social change. The study's findings of stages two and three will be used to attain a holistic understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE in a resource-constrained and patriarchal context. The study's findings are discussed in conjunction with extant literature, positioning the study in the academic field of FDE.

Finally, the study's contributions to academia, policymakers and broader society are discussed, followed by limitations and avenues for further research. The study makes three contributions. First, the study advances the understanding that the emancipatory potential of FDE is a comprehensive process (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009; Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018;

Trivedi and Petkova, 2022; Atarah *et al.*, 2023). Substantiating the emancipatory potential of FDE as a process, the study highlights that, even in a resource-constrained, patriarchal context like Sri Lanka, women can leverage in digital entrepreneurship given that array of factors encouraging their engagement in FDE. Further, in terms of catalyzing social change, this opportunity presents a trade-off: while it enhances specific facets of women's empowerment and agency, it also has the potential to reinforce patriarchal structures in other respects. The second contribution advances the Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT (IDTGIT) by broadening its application to two less-explored contexts: FDE and the Global South (Suseno and Abbott, 2021; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). This extension not only strengthens the theoretical framework it also offers valuable insights into the distinctive dynamics that are very unique to specific context, as well as certain dynamics that appear to be context independent. The third contribution is that exploring the emancipatory process represents a two-way interaction between FDE and the context, rather than viewing women as passive recipients of context (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Welter and Baker, 2021). This perspective highlights the active role that women play in shaping their environments while simultaneously being influenced by the socio-cultural and economic factors at play. The fourth contribution addresses the heterogeneity of experiences as gender intersects with various factors, including marital status and social class (Dy, Martin and Marlow, 2018; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). This recognition underscores that women's experiences in FDE are not monolithic; rather, they are shaped by the complex interplay of different identities and social positions, leading to diverse outcomes and challenges in their entrepreneurial journeys. In addition to the key contributions, an important finding lies in the definition of FDE (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). By establishing a clear and comprehensive understanding of FDE, this contribution addresses the previously ambiguous nature of the term and provides a solid basis for future research and exploration in this emerging field.

The chapter begins with the research problem, outlining the gaps in the existing literature that will be addressed through the study. The research objectives are then outlined. Thereafter, the proposed research framework and the key hypotheses are discussed. The chapter ends with an overview of the dissertation's structure, giving the reader a roadmap of subsequent chapters.

1.2 Research Problem

While the gendered dimensions of entrepreneurial participation have received growing academic attention, women's engagement in the nascent field of digital entrepreneurship remains insufficiently examined (Ughetto et al., 2020; Deng et al., 2025). Digital entrepreneurship, as a subcategory of entrepreneurship, has gained significant recognition for its potential to counter the ostracisation of certain social groups (Martin and Wright, 2005; Shirazi, 2012; Sundermeier, Wessel and Davidson, 2018; Leong *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, in the present day, digital entrepreneurship is recognised as a pragmatic solution to support women constrained by resources and patriarchal gender norms. The participation of women in entrepreneurship is significantly influenced by an array of environmental factors that often restrict their mobility, visibility, and access to essential resources (Jennings and Brush, 2013; Panda, 2018). Nonetheless, the rapid advancement of digital technologies has been recognised to create novel pathways for women to engage in entrepreneurial activities, allowing them to bypass, to some extent, the spatial and social constraints imposed by these traditional structures (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Manello et al., 2020; Alhothali and Al-Dajani, 2022; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025). This interplay between gender, technology, and entrepreneurship offers a unique perspective for exploring how women manoeuvre digital entrepreneurship as an emancipatory pathway within patriarchal contexts. The study of FDE thus becomes crucial for understanding the implications of digitalization on gender equity and the broader socio-economic landscape.

With the general belief that FDE provides a means of liberation for women, scholars have started exploring the emancipatory potential of FDE, which is an area that has attracted limited academic attention thus far (Dy, Martin and Marlow, 2018; Yu and Cui, 2019; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023). The findings of these studies focusing on the emancipatory potential of FDE are inconclusive, with some appreciating the liberating impacts of FDE with its ability to provide temporal and spatial flexibility in terms of access to resources, markets, information, finance, and networks (Martin and Wright, 2005; Manello et al., 2020; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020). Others, however, argue against the widely accepted notion of digital entrepreneurship as an emancipatory pathway, stating that it reproduces the power

structures and hierarchies of the brick-and-mortar world that govern resource allocation (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017; Dy, Martin and Marlow, 2018; Luo and Chan, 2021). These inconclusive findings underscore the need for additional studies to expand the body of knowledge in the field of FDE.

As emphasised by Trivedi and Petkova (2022), extant studies exploring emancipatory entrepreneurship are mainly confined to the outcomes, with limited attention paid to the processes through which women attain liberation and activate positive social change. Atarah and Nolan (2023) emphasise that it is imperative to examine entrepreneurship as a process of liberating from the existing constraints and creating new favourable conditions. Furthermore, Alkhaled and Berglund (2018) also emphasise that studies on the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurship should focus on a more holistic process because breaking constraints may not guarantee emancipation. As FDE is a subcategory of entrepreneurship, research on its emancipatory potential should focus on attaining a more comprehensive understanding of the entire process that enables individuals to challenge extant constraints and activate positive social change.

When exploring the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship, attention must be paid to attaining a contextualised understanding of the phenomenon to explore its nuances. Just as gender norms and related social expectations are context-embedded (Ely, 1994; Sundermeier, Wessel and Davidson, 2018; Marlow, Hicks and Treanor, 2019), entrepreneurship is also tied to the specific contextual conditions (Marlow, Hicks and Treanor, 2019; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020). This context-embeddedness is also true of digital entrepreneurship, as posited by Nambisan (2017). Thus, focused efforts are required to obtain a contextualised understanding of FDE. Due to its context-bound nature, scholars reiterate the importance of paying close attention to the different political, economic, and cultural contexts of FDE (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Ughetto *et al*., 2020; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). In brief, it is imperative to consider the context in which digital entrepreneurship occurs, as it directly impacts the extent to which an individual can experience liberation. Furthermore, existing literature highlights the need to study the mutual relationship between context and women's engagement in FDE, focusing on how they influence each other (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Welter,

2020). These gaps in the extant literature call for further studies to better understand the contextualised nature of FDE.

Notably, extant studies on FDE are mostly confined to the Global North (Marlow, 2020; Alhothali and Al-Dajani, 2022; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025; Jones *et al.*, 2025), with female digital entrepreneurs represented by white heterosexual, cisgender women. Unsurprisingly, their experiences cannot be compared with those of women from the Global South who live within resource constraints and under strict patriarchal gender norms. Additionally, a considerable number of studies have also been conducted in Middle Eastern countries (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024), which are economically stable and where the marginalisation of women has been institutionalised through legal frameworks. Many scholars have highlighted the need to pay more attention to the experience of female entrepreneurship in South Asian contexts (Dean *et al.*, 2019; Panda, 2018), along with the need to conduct more studies on STEM-related entrepreneurship in South Asia (Adikaram and Razik, 2023). Hence, there is a lacuna in studies on FDE in South Asia that focus on the experiences of female digital entrepreneurs from the Global South who have to navigate patriarchal gender norms and restrictive economic conditions. Sri Lanka presents a distinct context for the exploration of FDE, characterized by several socio-cultural and economic factors. The prevailing socio-cultural norms, marked by male dominance and patriarchy (Hewamanne, 2020; Adikaram and Razik, 2023), coupled with ongoing political and economic instabilities (Liang, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022; World Bank, 2023), is expected to exacerbate the marginalization of women. Despite these challenges, Sri Lanka demonstrates a relatively favourable standing in terms of gender parity compared to its South Asian neighbors (Banu, 2016). In the realm of digital technology also, women occupy a distinctive position in Sri Lanka. A notable trend has emerged within higher education, where female enrolment in STEM degree programmes now exceeds that of males, reflecting women's increasing participation in technology-oriented fields (Adikaram & Razik, 2023). Furthermore, based on the Institute of Policy Studies Sri Lanka (2025), women constitute approximately 34% of Sri Lanka's Information and Communication Technology (ICT) workforce. Although this is still below the 40% average seen across several European countries, it marks a steady and promising growth trajectory. Adding on, similar to many other countries, the nation experienced a substantial rise in internet penetration during the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated digital adoption and opened new avenues for

online engagement and enterprise (Kemp, 2021). Within this evolving digital landscape, exploring female participation in digital entrepreneurial ventures becomes both timely and vital.

Furthermore, researchers have emphasised the importance of exploring the experience of female digital entrepreneurs by bringing attention to the intersectional differences among women, which shape their unique experiences (Dy, Martin and Marlow, 2018; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025; Jones *et al.*, 2025). The intersectional perspective has highlighted the various interconnected layers of oppression that impact entrepreneurial opportunities and outcomes. Exploring how intersectional differences (resulting from the intersection of gender with other dimensions, such as marital status, geographical location, socioeconomic status, and education level) shape entrepreneurial identities and their pathways to liberation will provide a nuanced understanding of the FDE. Furthermore, understanding of FDE can be enhanced by investigating the impact of intersectionality on FDE, with a particular focus on the experiences of women from the Global South. This will challenge the singular representations of women entrepreneurs based on the experiences of women from the Global North, and highlight the diversity of women's experiences (Jones *et al.*, 2025).

Another notable gap that scholars emphasise is that research studies related to female entrepreneurship and gender, as well as Information Systems (IS) studies, do not sufficiently focus on established theoretical perspectives. Alhajri and Aloud (2024) noted that studies in the broad discipline of female entrepreneurship lack theoretical connections. The lack of theory in these studies was also criticised by previous scholars, who stated that it could lead to shallow interpretations of findings and overlook important findings (Brush, 1992; Fischer, Reuber, and Dyke, 1993; Ahl, 2006). Furthermore, researchers have highlighted the lack of theoretical underpinning in research on gender and Information Systems (IS) (Adam, Howcroft and Richardson, 2004; Suseno and Abbott, 2021; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Therefore, FDE, as an emerging field based on the broader disciplines of female entrepreneurship and gender and IS, may tend to overlook or inadequately use theoretical frameworks, which could dilute the overall quality of the research studies. Thus, bridging these gaps in the extant literature requires research to employ strong theoretical underpinnings and offer deep insights into complex phenomena, thereby enhancing the theoretical discussions of the field.

FDE, an emerging field, tends to rely predominantly on qualitative studies (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). While qualitative studies provide a broader, in-depth understanding of FDE, using different research methods is crucial for FDE to grow as a discipline. Previous literature has also argued for the need for studies on FDE to use multiple research methodologies, primarily due to the scarcity of studies employing multiple methods of inquiry (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024).

Thus, in an attempt to bridge these gaps in the extant literature, this study will critically explore FDE as an emancipatory pathway for Sri Lankan women constrained by the economy and deeply rooted in patriarchal gender norms. The contribution of the study will not be limited to bridging the gaps in the extant literature. The findings will also provide practical recommendations to realise the full potential of FDE for developing countries such as Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the theoretical model proposed based on the study's findings can be considered a comprehensive effort to understand the phenomenon of women employing digital entrepreneurship as a liberation pathway within a contextualised environment.

1.3 Research Objective

The study aims to comprehensively understand FDE's emancipatory potential in the context of economic constraints and deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms. Three research objectives (ROs) have been developed to reach this aim.

RO 1: To explore the factors driving Sri Lankan women to engage in FDE.

RO2: To explore how gender intersects with other social ascriptions, such as race, ethnicity, and social class and influences women's participation in FDE.

RO3: To attain an understanding of the transformative changes activated through women’s engagement in digital entrepreneurship.

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions formulated based on the above research objectives are given below.

RQ 1 What are the **change factors** that drive Sri Lankan women to engage in female digital entrepreneurship?

RQ 2 How does the digital entrepreneurial journey vary among the women in Sri Lanka as their **gender intersects with other social ascriptions**

RQ 3 What are the **transformative changes activated** through women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship?

1.5 Dissertation Outline

The dissertation comprises eight chapters, as follows.

Chapter One – Introduction

Chapter one provides an overview of the study. After exploring the gaps in the extant literature, the research problem is explained. The chapter then follows with the research objectives and research questions.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

The literature review focuses on examining and synthesising previous literature on FDE. As FDE is a novel subcategory of entrepreneurship, the literature review starts with exploring extant literature on entrepreneurship as a gendered phenomenon and gradually moves on to female entrepreneurship and digital entrepreneurship. It ultimately reviews the literature on FDE. The literature review establishes a strong theoretical foundation for the study by identifying the current gaps in knowledge and highlighting the key concepts and theoretical perspectives applicable to the current study. Furthermore, the literature review provides insights into how the present study can contribute to advancing the field of FDE.

Chapter Three – Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis

This chapter presents the proposed conceptual framework and hypotheses. Through the conceptual framework, the researcher attempts to provide a visual depiction of how women's intention to engage in FDE is shaped by the key variables of environmental factors, namely,

economic instability, attitude towards women, perceived formal institutional support; individual influences, namely role models, family support, previous work experiences, digital self-efficacy, internal motives, fear of failure; and individual identity factors namely socioeconomic status (SES), marital status, geography and educational background. The proposed hypotheses, which showcase the relationship between these variables, are also presented, offering precise, testable predictions. Testing these hypotheses will address the first two research objectives related to the change factors that drive women's participation in digital entrepreneurship and the impact of intersectionality on women's involvement in digital entrepreneurship.

Chapter Four-Research Method

Chapter four outlines the method of the present study. The philosophical underpinnings leading to the choice of methodology are discussed, and the rationale for adopting the mixed methods approach is elaborated based on the philosophical justifications. Adopting the mixed method, the sequential explanatory approach (quan → QUAL) for the main study is justified with the support of literature. The chapter explains the three stages of the study: stage one – informal exploratory expert interviews; stage two- the quantitative study employing surveys; and stage three- the qualitative study using interviews. Data collection tools used at each stage are elaborated with sufficient justifications.

Chapter Five- Quantitative Data Analysis

This chapter presents the results of the quantitative data analysis. At the outset, the data screening process was done to ensure the precision of the dataset was explained. Next, to ensure the data's validity and reliability, the process of testing the hypotheses based on the PLS approach using the SMART-PLS 4 software is detailed. The researcher attempts to sufficiently detail the data analysis process by highlighting its key steps and outcomes to maintain transparency and rigour in the data analysis process.

Chapter Six- Qualitative Data Analysis

This chapter focuses on presenting the outcomes of the qualitative data analysis. It also presents meta-inferences by triangulating the data from qualitative and quantitative analyses. The chapter begins with a reflection on the qualitative data collection process, followed by the

procedure used in qualitative data analysis. Ultimately, the themes derived are presented with direct quotes from the respondents to substantiate the arguments made. The qualitative phase of the study focuses on addressing all three research objectives and attaining a comprehensive understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE in the Sri Lankan context. The chapter ends by focusing on integrating the findings derived from phases 2 and 3 of the study to develop meta-inferences.

Chapter Seven – Discussion

This chapter focuses on interpreting the findings, aligning them with the extant literature, and highlighting their theoretical implications. First, the study's key findings are reviewed alongside the study's objectives. Next, key findings are discussed and interpreted with reference to previous literature to ensure that the study is positioned in the field of FDE. Finally, the theoretical model derived from the empirical findings is presented, and the chapter concludes with an overview of the study's empirical, theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions.

Chapter Eight – Conclusion

This chapter focuses on the study's contributions, implications, and limitations, which pave the way for future research. It starts with a summary of the findings, followed by the study's theoretical contributions. This is followed by an explanation of its practical implications. Ultimately, the study's limitations and directions for future research are elaborated upon.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to reviewing existing literature to identify gaps that need to be addressed and to determine theories that can be used to fulfil the purpose of this study. Figure 2.1 illustrates the overall structure of the chapter. Since female digital entrepreneurship (FDE) is a relatively new field that has garnered limited academic attention, the literature review will focus on gender, female entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship and gradually narrowing down to the topic of FDE and theoretical lenses. The structure begins with content related to gender and female entrepreneurship, which involves a discussion of the broader topic of entrepreneurship, discussing key definitions, gender stereotypes, male connotations associated with entrepreneurship, and the othering of women from this male-dominated domain. Subsequently, the review transitions to digital entrepreneurship content, where FDE will be discussed explicitly as a liberating pathway to overcome challenges and uplift the status of women. The final section focuses on the theoretical lenses that provide the foundation for understanding a process view of the emancipatory potential of FDE. The chapter ends with a brief recap of the identified gaps in the literature.

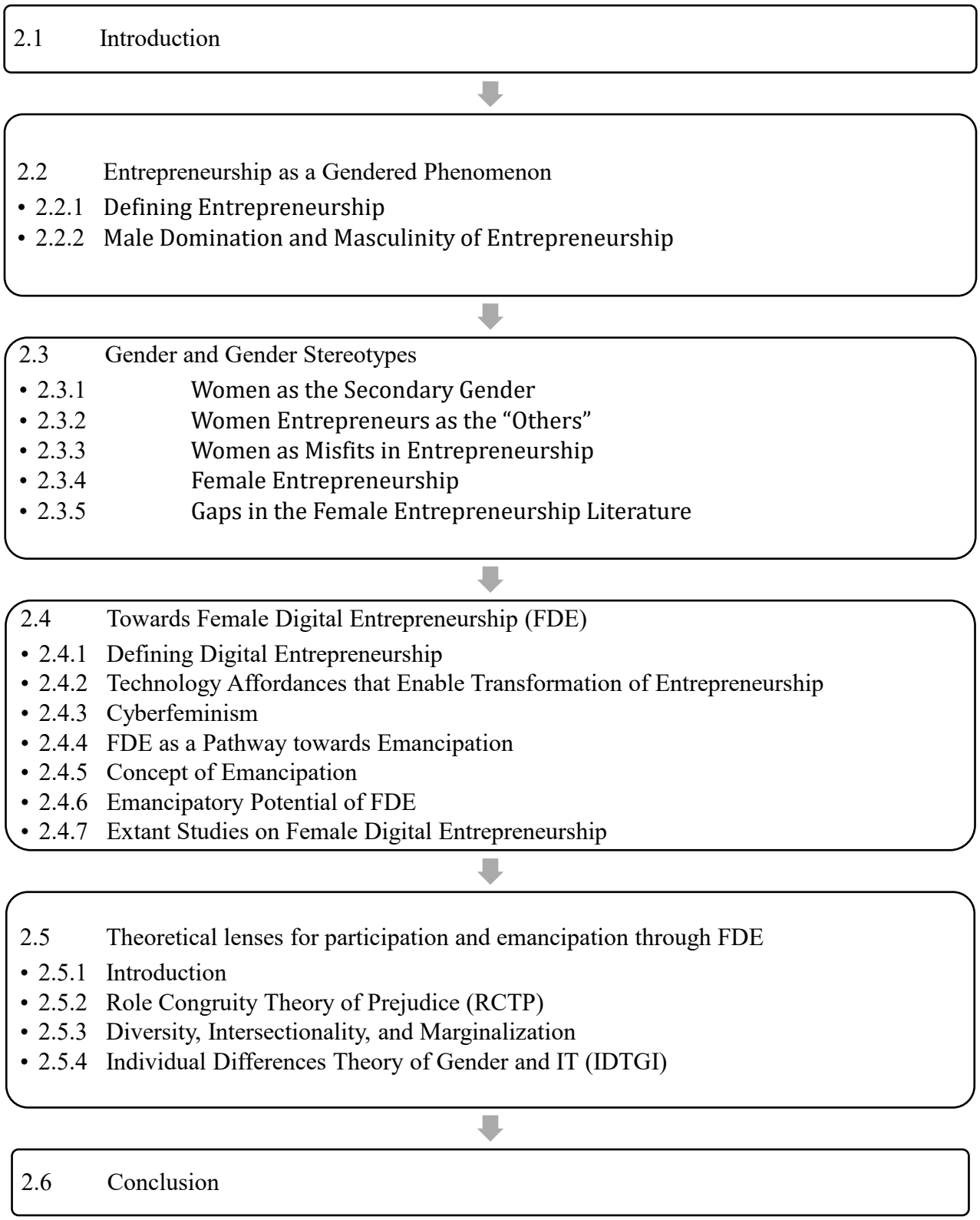

Figure 2.1 Chapter Structure

2.2 Entrepreneurship as a Gendered Phenomenon

2.2.1 Defining Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship has always been instrumental in economic growth, generating jobs and new products for the market, alleviating poverty and solving social issues (Praag, 1999; Rijkers *et al.*, 2014; Hessels and Naudé, 2019; Prince, Chapman and Cassey, 2021). Due to its central role as a catalyst for economic development and social transformation, entrepreneurship has received considerable academic and policy-level attention (Hessels and Naudé, 2019). Over the years, the field of entrepreneurship has evolved into a dynamic area shaped by the transformations happening worldwide. From the inception of entrepreneurship as a distinctive academic field until today, "What is entrepreneurship?" has remained a question that has garnered significant scholarly attention (Leunbach, 2021). Many leading scholars in the field have highlighted diversity and a lack of consensus on defining entrepreneurship (Gartner, 1995; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Bruyat and Julien, 2001; Kobia and Sikalieh, 2010; Casson and Casson, 2014; Landström, 2020; Prince, Chapman and Cassey, 2021). Welter *et al*. (2017, p. 7) emphasised that "entrepreneurship, understood broadly, is heterogeneous, blooming, messy, and a sometimes-glorious social tool that is widely available". Researchers have identified several reasons for the lack of a commonly agreed-upon definition of entrepreneurship (Refer to Appendix A). Though variations in definitions are common in social science domains (Urban, 2010), establishing definitional clarity in the broader area of entrepreneurship is critical as the concept continues to evolve and extend into various subfields.

Although the establishment of entrepreneurship as a distinct scientific field has a relatively short history, dating back to the 1970s, the concept of entrepreneurship can be traced to human civilisation (Mokaya *et al.*, 2012; Carlen, 2016). Cantillon, an economist of Irish origin who resided in France, is recognized as the first scholar to articulate a viable economic interpretation of entrepreneurship (Karayiannis, 2009; Nagarajan, 2011; Carlen, 2016; Landström, 2020). His foundational work has inspired a multitude of scholars over the decades to further refine and expand upon the definition of entrepreneurship (Refer Appendix B for Entrepreneurship Definitions Before and After 1990). While the early definitions of entrepreneurship significantly contributed to its evolution as a distinct discipline, they have been criticised for a variety of

reasons. For instance, scholars have raised concerns about the early definitions revolving around one key aspect of entrepreneurship rather than focusing on holistically defining the phenomenon (Low and Macmillan, 1988; Nagarajan, 2011), placing significant attention on entrepreneurs' traits and personal characteristics (Gartner, 1995; Kamineni, 2002; Hedner, Abouzeedan and Klofsten, 2011; Casson and Casson, 2014) and viewing entrepreneurship primarily as a pursuit of profit, frequently neglecting its potential to enhance societal well-being or provide value to customers (Praag, 1999). Bridging the lapses in the early definitions, most of the late definitions developed by scholars used a combination of functions to define entrepreneurship rather than relying on a single function

Although entrepreneurship has not yet gained definitional consensus, some key functions, namely *risk-taking, creating or seizing opportunities, satisfying customers, profit maximisation, and adding value to society,* have been identified in the available definitions (Refer Appendix C for Common Themes Based on Entrepreneurship Definitions). Therefore, rather than proposing another definition, considering the key characteristics and functions identified by scholars would be more effective for determining the scope of entrepreneurship. Since the field of entrepreneurship already has a wide array of definitions proposed by different authors, adding one more definition to the list will not create any additional value (Bruyat and Julien, 2001). Hence, for the purpose of this study, the researcher will use the definition proposed by Prince *et al*. (2021, p. 29), "the act of generating and developing an idea for validation". Dissecting the definition, Prince *et al.* (2021) emphasise that this definition recognises entrepreneurship as an act which involves exploiting opportunities by coming up with novel ideas, developing an offering, and validating its appropriateness to the target market, which requires innovation and risk-taking. As Bruyat and Julien (2001, p. 165) state, "we will not understand the phenomenon of entrepreneurship if we do not consider the individual (the entrepreneur), the project, the environment and also the links between them over time". It is evident that the definition proposed by Prince *et al.* (2021) takes a more holistic and constructive approach, which captures the integration of the individual, the project, and the external environment.

2.2.2 Male Domination and Masculinity of Entrepreneurship

Adhering to the male-dominant structure of society, business organisations are also widely recognised as men's entities that function with rules, regulations, practices, and expectations (Acker, 1990). The typical characterisation of business as a male domain is reflected in entrepreneurship, which has also been identified as a male-dominated sphere (Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Laguía *et al.*, 2019). Traditionally, theorists have described entrepreneurs as men with extraordinary charisma and a hero-type image (Kamineni, 2002; Ahl, 2004; Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2004; Montanye, 2006; Lombardi *et al.*, 2020). Organisational and feminist theorists have explained how male characterisation is embedded in the entrepreneurship phenomenon and how it continues to dominate the entrepreneurial market despite the increase in the number of women entrepreneurs (Lewis, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Marlow and McAdam, 2013; Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; Laguía *et al.*, 2019; Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020). For instance, Ahl and Marlow (2012, p. 544) claim that the *masculine discourse informing entrepreneurship is normative, invites universal subscription and represents those outside this norm as 'other'*. According to Marlow and Dy (2018) the normative entrepreneur is a heterosexual white male who receives recognition and privilege through his gender. Despite numerous structural changes in society over the decades, the gendered ascription of entrepreneurship persists (Rugina and Ahl, 2024). Despite some of the scholarly efforts to frame entrepreneurship as a meritocratic space that provides more promising career opportunities than paid jobs for ostracised communities such as women (Laguía *et al.*, 2019; Choi and Kim, 2021), it is clear that there are constraints on who can claim the entrepreneur identity (Lewis, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012, 2021).

Reviewing the extant literature revealed that the use of gendered language and aligning entrepreneurial behaviours and characteristics with masculine attributes have played pivotal roles in perceiving entrepreneurship as a male domain. For example, in many studies, researchers used language to replicate the idea that the "entrepreneur is a man" (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). Most authors have used the term "he" as an alternative to the entrepreneur, which exemplifies the practice of giving a male identity to any entrepreneur irrespective of their actual gender (Hartmann, 1959; Long, 1983; Gartner, 1988; Hébert and Link, 1989; Praag, 1999; Kirzner, 2008; Salerno, 2008; Mokaya, Namusonge and Sikalieh, 2012). Another example of the gender bias in language

use within entrepreneurship is the inadvertent use of male-gendered language and imagery for promotional materials on entrepreneurial training programmes. Studies reveal that such practices discourage women's involvement in these training programmes (Zisser *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, in most academic case studies related to entrepreneurship, entrepreneurs are mostly confined to male entrepreneurs and widely discussed entrepreneurial role models are men (Gupta *et al.*, 2009; Ahl and Marlow, 2012).

Thus, it is evident that the persistent use of gender-exclusive language augments the social perception of entrepreneurship as a masculine discourse. Additionally, scholars have employed certain idioms and phrases that confirm entrepreneurship's masculine-bound nature. For instance, when explaining the significance of entrepreneurship in economic discussions, Baumol (1968) states *the theoretical firm which is entrepreneur less is more similar to the Prince of Denmark has expunged from the discussion of Hamlet* (p. 68). Here, the inadvertent use of a male hero is a classic instance of the use of male-centric examples in entrepreneurial discourse.

Furthermore, there is a plethora of phrases and terms related to entrepreneurship that are male-centric. For example, Laguía *et al*. (2019) emphasised that the strong association of entrepreneurs with male characterisation is replicated through the phrase “Think Man Think Entrepreneur”. Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio (2004, p. 407) perceive *the entrepreneur as the conqueror of unexplored territories, the lonely hero, the patriarch*. In addition, McAdam (2013, p. 23) highlights that *entrepreneurship requires high levels of testosterone, which indicates the masculine nature of entrepreneurship*. Furthermore, when reviewing the literature on defining an entrepreneur via the trait approach, it is evident that most scholars defined an entrepreneur as an extraordinary individual who can only be emulated by a male (Say, 1816, cited in Cole, 1946; Gartner, 1988; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). Thus, language has been used subjectively in entrepreneurship literature, emphasising the masculine identity of entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2004; Marlow and McAdam, 2013).

2.3 Gender and Gender Stereotypes

Individuals are social actors, and how they make sense of the other parties in society and understand power relations is highly influenced by their gender (Jensen, 2011; Paechter, 2018). Therefore, understanding the ideology behind gender is pivotal to realising how the power structures and social hierarchies are developed in society because it determines how individuals access resources, make decisions, and involve in political and social development (Kangas, Haider and Fraser, 2014). The literature demarcates between sex and gender, where sex is recognised as a biological status and gender is identified as a social construct (Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2015; Marlow and Dy, 2018; Heise *et al.*, 2019; Butler,1990, cited in Ahl and Marlow, 2021). Being a socially constructed construct, gender includes norms, behavioural aspects, and roles which are deemed appropriate for women and men (Ahl, 2006; Kangas, Haider and Fraser, 2014; Marlow and Dy, 2018; Heise *et al.*, 2019). Gender also implies the kind of behaviour the society expects from men and women in different contexts. More specifically, gender norms tend to reflect femininity and masculinity (Bem, 1974; Ahl, 2006; Marlow and Dy, 2018). Masculinity and femininity lie at the two extreme ends of the gender continuum, where masculinity is positioned as oppositional to femininity (Ahl, 2006; Pringle, 2008; Paechter, 2018).

However, while it is imperative to have a clear idea about the demarcation between the terms gender and sex, it should be noted that in many instances, biological sex and gender are used interchangeably or synonymously (Ahl, 2006; Pringle, 2008). According to a discourse analysis conducted by Ahl (2006), which reviewed 81 journal articles on female entrepreneurship, it has been identified that most authors use the term "gender" interchangeably with "biological sex". Due to the intertwined nature of sex and gender, rather than attempting to demarcate gender and sex as entirely independent from each other, it may be better to appreciate that the self-concept, identity, and behavioural choices of an individual are an outcome of a relationship between biological sex and gender.

An individual's identity combines two constructs, which can be categorised as personal and social components. Personal aspects encompass personality, biological, and intellectual attributes, while the social component comprises prominent social groups, including gender, race, social

hierarchies, and nationality (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Thus, an individual's self-identity is significantly influenced by society's perception of them. Society tends to group individuals with somewhat similar characteristics into one social cohort, which paves the way for ubiquitous "stereotypes" of gender, ethnic groups, religions, and professions. Stereotypes are sets of beliefs consensually held by society, which result in the formation of normative expectancies related to the traits and behaviours that individuals in a particular cohort are expected to demonstrate (Rudman and Phelan, 2008; Stewart *et al.*, 2021).

Eagly and Wood (2012) emphasised that gender stereotypes form as a result of perceivers observing typical behaviours mostly showcased by males and females and making inferences about the genders of individuals based on the corresponding dispositions they showcase. Since the behaviours of individuals influence the formation of stereotypes, it is vital to examine the reasons behind particular gendered behaviours. In the ancient world, larger body size and physical strength, which are physical attributes of men, were considered prerequisites for engaging in economic activities such as farming and hunting. On the other hand, women's capacity for biological reproduction made them more effective in nurturing and caretaking roles (Eagly and Wood, 2012). These functional distinctions of labour between women and men based on physical strength laid the foundation for forming gender norms and stereotypes, reinforcing the perception of men as providers and women as caretakers (Diekman and Eagly, 2000; Eagly and Wood, 2012). These gender norms, formed based on the division of labour, have persisted across generations, influencing societal expectations and cultural frameworks.

The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), developed by Sandra Bem in 1974, is one of the earliest and most extensively used scales in evaluating an individual's gender role perceptions (Holt and Ellis, 1998; Peng, 2006). The recognition of the masculine and feminine attributes for the BSRI scale is based on the characteristics perceived as more socially desirable in men and women within the American context (Bem, 1974). Table 2.3 below shows the masculine and feminine attributes based on the BSRI scale. However, the validity of the BSRI is questioned in the present-day context because the roles of men and women have changed over the years due to social transformations. The BSRI scale is also criticised for oversimplifying gender (Hoffman and Borders, 2001). Yet, scholars have tested its validity and found that the masculine and feminine

attributes proposed by the BSRI scale remain valid in the contemporary context (Holt and Ellis, 1998; Peng, 2006). Furthermore, Cheryan and Markus (2020) have recently identified the stereotypical masculine and feminine attributes in the US context (Refer to Appendix D), and these attributes are not significantly different from the gender attributes outlined by the BSRI scale. Thus, the attributes identified based on the BSRI scale, which was developed four decades ago, remain valid even today. This provides an interesting insight, that is, masculine and feminine identities associated with agency and communality, respectively, remain mostly unchanged, though society has drastically changed over time. When exploring gender stereotypes in depth, it becomes evident that an individual's endorsement of either masculine or feminine characteristics will not only identify the person as male or female but also position them as the binary opposite of the other gender (Rudman and Phelan, 2008).

Table 2.1 Attributes of Masculinity and Femininity of the BSRI Scale

Masculine Attributes	**Feminine Attributes**
Acts as a Leader	Affectionate
Aggressive	Cheerful
Ambitious	Childlike
Analytical	Compassionate
Assertive	Does not use harsh language
Athletic	Eager to soothe hurt feelings
Competitive	Feminine
Defends own beliefs	Flatterable
Dominant	Gentle
Forceful	Gullible
Has leadership abilities	Loves children
Independent	Loyal
Individualistic	Sensitive to the needs of others
Makes decisions easily	Shy
Masculine	Soft spoken
Self-reliant	Sympathetic

Self-sufficient	Tender
Strong Personality	Understanding
Willing to take a stand	Warm
Willing to take risk	Yeilding

Note: These attributes are extracted from "The measurement of psychological androgyny," by Sandra Bem (1974) Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 42 (2), p 156 (https://doi.org/10.1037/h0036215)

As mentioned earlier, stereotypical beliefs about gender confine women to having more communal attributes and men to having more agentic attributes, whereas masculinity in women and vice versa are deeply disfavoured by society (Heise *et al.*, 2019). Even though there is a growing appreciation for the need to address archaic and detrimental stereotypes about gender, it is still evident that stereotypical beliefs persist in almost all cultural contexts (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Peng, 2006; Cuddy *et al*., 2015; Cheryan and Markus, 2020). These stereotypical beliefs explicitly and implicitly pressure individuals to conform to predefined roles, which negatively influences their freedom of choice vis-à-vis their personal and career aspirations. While gender stereotypes negatively impact both men's and women's aspirations, the effects are more detrimental to women when it comes to their career aspirations (Stewart *et al.*, 2021). These stereotypes often confine women to their homes, limiting their access to opportunities in education and employment.

The masculine identity of entrepreneurship is also associated with stereotypical masculine characteristics and behaviours used to interpret entrepreneurial behaviour. Masculinity and entrepreneurship are strongly intertwined, as the attributes expected from a traditional entrepreneurial actor are similar to masculine attributes (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2004; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Harrison, Leitch and Mcadam, 2015). Table 2.2 demonstrates the key attributes of entrepreneurs mentioned by leading scholars and how they relate to the masculine characteristics ascribed to the male gender based on BEM's Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) (Bem, 1974).

Table 2.2 Masculine Characteristics Based on BSRI and Related Entrepreneurial Attributes

Masculine Characteristics	**Related Entrepreneurial Attributes**
Act as a leader	Entrepreneurs come up with innovations and initiating business ventures (Carland *et al.*, 1984; Hébert and Link, 1989; Schumpeter, 1947, cited in Landström, 2020). Entrepreneurs are influential and visionary personnel who bring economic development (Carland *et al.*, 1984). Entrepreneurs remain at the pinnacle of the organisational hierarchy as leaders while retaining responsibilities of thriving organisation towards success (Baumol, 1968; Say, 1971, cited in Praag, 1999). Entrepreneurs should evolve as natural leaders (Marshall as cited in Karayiannis, 2009).
Aggressive	Entrepreneurs aggressively stimulate change (Mokaya *et al.*, 2012; Elert and Henrekson, 2021).
Ambitious	Entrepreneurs persistently engage in business to ensure success despite the barriers (Say, 1971, cited in Gartner, 1988). They show strong desire/ need for achievement (Gartner, 1988; Kamineni, 2002; Stevenson and Jarillo, 2007; Karayiannis, 2009; Audretsch, 2012).
Analytical	Entrepreneurs are expected to be vigilant and forward-looking (Praag, 1999). Entrepreneurs differ from others based on their ability to foresee opportunities and seize them (Alvarez and Barney, 2007). Successful entrepreneurs should be vigilant to price, technology, and demand changes in a volatile marketplace (Kirzner, 2008).

Assertive	Entrepreneurs know themselves and the business, and are fully aware of the stakeholders with whom they deal (Sarasvathy, 2001). Entrepreneurship requires assertive behaviour (Wiklund *et al.*, 2019).
Athletic	Success as an entrepreneur demands a great level of energy (Long, 1983, Schumpeter, 1947, cited in Mokaya, Namusonge and Sikalieh, 2012). The life span of a business is closely aligned with the energy levels of the entrepreneur (Loasby, 1976, cited in Karayiannis, 2009).
Competitive	Entrepreneurs are vigilant about opportunities and seize them better than others. Competitive marketplaces create a significant drive towards entrepreneurs (Kirzner, 1973, cited in Mokaya *et al*., 2012).
Defends own beliefs	Entrepreneurs strongly persist in attaining goals despite the continuous challenges they have to face (Say, 1971, cited in Praag, 1999). Entrepreneurs make decisions with elevated self-confidence (Praag, 1999).
Dominant	Entrepreneurs comprise powerful capitalists with high levels of business capabilities and skills, which make them influential individuals in the marketplace (Marshall, 1964, cited in Long, 1983).
Forceful	Entrepreneurial individuals have high confidence in their own entrepreneurial capabilities (Krueger, 2000). Successful entrepreneurs make bold moves (Schumpeter, 1934 cited in Kirzner, 2008).
Leadership Abilities	Entrepreneurs exercise leadership capabilities (Baumol, 1968).

	Charismatic and expertise leadership are equally important for an entrepreneur who explores existing opportunities in the environment, but charismatic leadership may be more useful when entrepreneurs create new opportunities (Alvarez and Barney, 2007).
Independent	Entrepreneurs yearn for independence (Gartner, 1988; Collins & Moore, 1964, cited in Stevenson and Jarillo, 2007).
Individualistic	Entrepreneurs prefer to work in individualised contexts (Karayiannis, 2009). Entrepreneurs prefer to be their own bosses and do things in a style which is unique to themselves (Wiklund *et al.*, 2019).
Make decisions easily	Entrepreneurs have the ability to make effective decisions about opportunities despite uncertainty (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). Entrepreneurs should be competent in using context-appropriate (creation of opportunities and discovering unexplored opportunities) tools to make effective decisions (Alvarez and Barney, 2007). Entrepreneurs create new businesses that have not existed previously, which urges them to make decisions under uncertain circumstances (Sarasvathy, 2001).
Self-reliant	Entrepreneurs show a high internal locus of control (Brockhaus Sr., 1980; Hull, Bosley and Udell, 1980; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000).
Self-sufficient	Entrepreneurs are inherently self-directed and engage in coordinating various resources to capitalise on market changes for profit (Wiklund *et al.*, 2019). Entrepreneurs rely on their personal judgements (Marshall, 1964, cited in Long, 1983).

Strong Personality	Entrepreneurs are able to process diverse information simultaneously, be ready and resourceful when needed, and have the power of speculation under uncertain circumstances (Marshall, 1964, cited in Karayiannis, 2009; Praag, 2009). Entrepreneurs have extraordinary personalities that are often not found in ordinary individuals (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000).
Willing to take a stand	Entrepreneurs fight to protect their decisions and demonstrate perseverance even when experiencing frustration and fatigue (Cloninger et al., 1993; Say, 1971, cited in Praag, 1999).
Willing to take risks	Entrepreneurs take risks (Hull, Bosley and Udell, 1980; Long, 1983; McClellan, 1961, cited in Carland *et al.*, 1984; Praag, 1999; Nagarajan, 2011; Knight, 1921, cited in Casson and Casson, 2014; Landström, 2020).

Note: The author developed this table using the extant literature by many scholars

Masculine defaults in entrepreneurial contexts involve valuing, recognising, and rewarding characteristics and actions related to male gender roles, which put females and other minority genders in a severely disadvantaged position (Marlow and Dy, 2018; Marlow, Hicks and Treanor, 2019). Therefore, to dismantle or reshape the entrenched masculine identity associated with entrepreneurship over the decades, it is imperative to explore how women have been excluded from the normative entrepreneurial discourse (See Appendix E for Factors Affecting the Portrayal of Entrepreneurship as a Masculine Discourse).

2.3.1 Women as the Secondary Gender

Early feminist scholars have observed that since the early days of human civilisation, women have been considered as 'the other'. For instance, in her book The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir emphasised how men reflect the norm of humanity while placing women in the position of the other (de Beauvoir, 1997, cited in Jensen, 2011). Othering primarily focuses on excluding

individuals who do not fit into the social norms required to be part of a particular community. In terms of gender, this means that men employ the centre in all spheres of life while women are pushed to the periphery, especially in traditionally male-dominated industries (Ahl, 2004).

Male dominance and patriarchy are well-documented throughout human history as embedded norms of society (Webster and Foschi, 1988, cited in Ely, 1994; Raghuvanshi, Agrawal and Ghosh, 2017). In fact, gender will not only shape an individual's behaviour but also have a pervasive influence on power relations in society. In analysing power relations, it becomes evident that the dominant gender possesses the authority to define who holds power and who remains subordinate (Jensen, 2011). As men occupy roles that require agentic behaviours, men afford power, and as the powerful party who possess authority, they determine the subordination of women (Marlow and Dy, 2018). Substantiating this deep-rooted gender binary and the power relationship between males and females, in most gender studies, men are regarded as the norm, and women are used as a proxy for gender (Ashcraft, 2011, cited in Harrison, Leitch and Mcadam, 2015; Marlow and Dy, 2018; Ahl and Marlow, 2021). This hierarchical structure, which recognises women as secondary (Jensen, 2011), limits women's access to education, resources, and career opportunities (Heise *et al.*, 2019; Bussolo *et al.*, 2024). This systemic deprivation of opportunities not only restricts women's ability to break free from their subordinate status but also results in perpetuating gender-based inequalities (Heise et al., 2019).

Gender hierarchies and marginalisation of women is a global phenomenon, though its manifestations and severity vary across different contexts (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). The Western world dominates the studies on women and gender, and as a result, the discussions of these studies are centred on the experiences of white men and women (Paechter, 2018; Marlow, 2020). In these studies, a powerful man is a white, cisgender, able-bodied individual, and the suppressed female is a white, heterosexual, and cisgender woman whose experience cannot be juxtaposed with the women in other parts of the world (Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2015; Johnson and Otto, 2019). Thus, it requires exploring women's experiences in diverse contexts, as there are differences in the marginalisation experienced by women from different settings.

2.3.2 Women Entrepreneurs as the "Others"

Masculine identity given to entrepreneurship results in the unequivocal positioning of the female in the position of "others" (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2004; Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017; Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020). The popular discourse shows entrepreneurship as a meritocratic platform that allows anyone with enterprising capabilities to thrive. However, the validity of this claim is challenged by the male identity attributed to entrepreneurship (See Section 2. 5. 4), which is normative and sanctioned (Lewis, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Marlow and McAdam, 2013; Harrison, Leitch and Mcadam, 2015; Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018; Marlow, Hicks and Treanor, 2019). Perceiving women in entrepreneurship as less legitimate actors creates visible and invisible barriers for women entrepreneurs, leading to lesser female participation in the entrepreneurial arena (Marlow and Dy, 2018). Consequently, women not only continue to face obstacles to entrepreneurial participation, but even when they do pursue entrepreneurship, their businesses are often perceived as underperforming (Du and Henrekson, 2000). Such stereotyping will undermine the female entrepreneur's contributions to socio-economic development, which may further discourage women from pursuing business ventures. The male-centric nature of entrepreneurship will flourish if a lesser number of women pursue entrepreneurship. When women do not explore male-dominated fields like entrepreneurship, they will be further discouraged from entering such domains and vice versa. This will assert the continued male dominance in fields like entrepreneurship.

2.3.3 Women as Misfits in Entrepreneurship

The secondary gender status not only hinders women's ability to start entrepreneurial ventures but also leads to the perception that women-owned businesses are secondary and underperforming, a notion widely accepted without sufficient evidence (Ahl, 2004; Zolin and Watson, 2013). Entrepreneurship indicates more bias towards masculinity and highlights deficits in women in relation to behaviours, characteristics, and skills (Marlow and Dy, 2018). As shown above in Table 2.2, entrepreneurial attributes mirror many attributes of hegemonic masculinity, including opportunity identification and risk-taking. Therefore, entrepreneurial attributes are juxtaposed with feminine attributes (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). Ahl and Marlow (2012) further

explain how men are identified as aggressive, competitive, and risk-taking, while women are placed on the other end of the spectrum as vigilant, risk-averse, and conventional. Most of the previous literature on entrepreneurship find women lacking in aggression, competitiveness, selfishness, and independence, which are traditionally recognised as masculine and entrepreneurial attributes (Eagly and Steffen, 1984; Jennings and Brush, 2013; Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; Wannamakok and Chang, 2020); thus women may be perceived as deficient entrepreneurs.

An analysis of the extant literature reveals that perceiving women as inherently risk-averse undermines their suitability for entrepreneurial roles. Studies show that women perceive risk differently from their male counterparts, and risk adversity among women is far more noticeable (Fossen, 2009; United Nations ESCAP, 2015; Raghuvanshi, Agrawal and Ghosh, 2017; Sundermeier, Wessel and Davidson, 2018; Laguía *et al.*, 2019). Aversion to risk driven by fear of failure may reduce the number of women embracing entrepreneurial opportunities and result in a high churn rate among women entrepreneurs (Fossen, 2009; Marlow and McAdam, 2013). On the other hand, some scholars argue that women are not inherently risk-averse. These scholars emphasise that rather than perceiving women's risk aversion as a deficit, it should be perceived as a result of deeply ingrained norms where girls are socially conditioned to be cautious, nurturing and risk-averse (Raghuvanshi, Agrawal and Ghosh, 2017).

Extant research on entrepreneurship also discusses the nexus between gender and opportunity. Some researchers believe that gender does not have a significant impact on the recognition of entrepreneurial opportunities, specifically in identifying and seizing viable commercial opportunities, which are at the core of entrepreneurial efforts (DeTienne and Chandler, 2007; Wannamakok and Chang, 2020). However, others have argued that women demonstrate a lack of competence in terms of opportunity-seeking compared to their male counterparts (van der Zwan *et al.*, 2016; Raghuvanshi, Agrawal and Ghosh, 2017; Ryu and Kim, 2020). Further to this, human capital is instrumental in identifying opportunities (DeTienne and Chandler, 2007). When exploring the constructs that affect an individual's human capital development, prior work experience, educational levels, and entrepreneurial experiences emerge as the key constructs of human capital (DeTienne and Chandler, 2007; Marvel, Davis and Sproul, 2016). As women's access to education and the labour force is somewhat limited in contexts dominated by deep-rooted

gender norms, their level of human capital is likely compromised compared to that of men, which may hinder their potential for identifying opportunities.

By not accepting women as legitimate or successful entrepreneurs, the society portrays women as individuals who lack the necessary qualities for entrepreneurship. Moreover, even those ambitious women who successfully navigate discriminatory barriers and enter the entrepreneurial market face further exclusion (Ahl and Marlow, 2021). Despite the efforts of these women, their business initiatives are often devalued as deficient, with limited growth potential (Du and Henrekson, 2000). The female underperformance hypothesis presented by Du and Henrekson (2000, p. 1) emphasises that *all else equal, female entrepreneurs tend to be less successful than their male counterparts in terms of conventional economic performance measures*. This has become a taken-for-granted assumption in the entrepreneurial context and remains an invisible driver which places women in a secondary position (Du and Henrekson, 2000; Zolin and Watson, 2013; Dean *et al.*, 2019).

When reviewing the extant literature, it becomes evident that the underperformance of female entrepreneurial initiatives is mainly attributed to shortcomings of womanhood, which creates the perception that women lack what is needed to be successful entrepreneurs (Ahl, 2004; Ahl and Marlow, 2012, 2021; Marlow and McAdam, 2013; Zolin and Watson, 2013; Dean *et al.,* 2019). For example, negative attributes like poor educational attainments, less enthusiasm, and lack of drive towards the growth of the business; lack of training; and poor networking capabilities (Mirchandani, 1999; Ahl, 2004; Jennings and Brush, 2013; Dean *et al.*, 2019) have been identified as drawbacks of womanhood. Such attributions create an obstacle for acknowledging women as legitimate entrepreneurs. Attributing the lack of entrepreneurial success to womanhood, most research work and consultancy projects recommend providing adequate training and assistance to equip women with the necessary skills and resources (Bosma, 2013; United Nations ESCAP, 2015; Raghuvanshi, Agrawal and Ghosh, 2017; Asian Development Bank, 2018). However, most feminist scholars criticise the female underperformance hypothesis, and emphasise the importance of exploring discursive practices which make women deficient rather than blaming women for their state of marginalisation (Welter, 2004; Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020) (See Appendix F for a further discussion of the criticisms of the female

underperformance hypotheses). Evidently, the uncritical endorsement of the female underperformance hypothesis can lead to misdirected policy initiatives on female entrepreneurship, which fail to address the underlying issues related to the marginalisation of women in the entrepreneurial context (Zolin and Watson, 2013).

2.3.4 Female Entrepreneurship

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 way of augmenting social well-being (Minniti and Arenius, 2003; Minniti, 2010; Panda, 2018). In the scholarly literature, female entrepreneurship is broadly defined as women initiating groundbreaking and ascendable business models to improve the economy (Jennings and Brush, 2013). Both the societal perception of women as a secondary gender and the perception of entrepreneurship as a male-dominated field have made the journey for women entrepreneurs more challenging and often unattainable (Ahl, 2004). Despite facing multiple barriers, women entrepreneurs have successfully risen in the entrepreneurial business context, where women are considered the fastest-growing segment of entrepreneurs globally (Brush and Cooper, 2012; Sajjad *et al.*, 2020). According to the GEM (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor) (2025), despite the proliferation of female entrepreneurship, men still outnumber women in many economies in both spheres: starting businesses and owning established businesses. For example, in 27% of the countries studied, the rate of new entrepreneurship among men exceeds that of women by at least five percentage points (GEM, 2025). As more women gradually venture into entrepreneurship, many scholars have begun exploring the role of women in the growth and advancement of nations. For example, Minniti (2010) claimed that the positive contribution of female entrepreneurial activities outweighs the advantages generated by male entrepreneurs. Female entrepreneurship has been praised not only as a means of fostering economic growth (Vossenberg, 2013; Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020; Ughetto *et al.*, 2020) but also for promoting social inclusion by empowering individuals, providing equal opportunities, and alleviating poverty (Kutanis and Bayraktaroglu, 2003; Welter, 2004; Zhao, Hills and Seibert, 2005; Jennings and Brush, 2013; United Nations ESCAP, 2015; Asian Development Bank, 2018; Sajjad *et al*., 2020). Overall, it is

evident that female entrepreneurship serves as a platform for economic development and social upliftment.

Female entrepreneurship plays a pivotal role in developing economies, which face challenges such as weak institutional policies, lack of physical capital, alarmingly high poverty levels, low productivity, limited international trade, political instability, and a heavy dependence on external loans (Panda, 2018; Cardella, Hernández-Sánchez and Sánchez-García, 2020). The benefits of these female entrepreneurial activities extend beyond economic development, as they play a significant role in alleviating poverty, reducing unemployment, and creating jobs that are pivotal for developing economies (Rashid and Ratten, 2020). Furthermore, due to the nurturing, compassionate, and other-oriented nature of women (Bem, 1974; Cheryan and Markus, 2020), female entrepreneurs often share their gains with their families, communities, and worthy causes such as health and education and society's well-being (Jennings and Brush, 2013; Zisser *et al.*, 2019; Rashid and Ratten, 2020; Sajjad *et al.*, 2020). Further, Boehe and Cruz (2013) claim that female entrepreneurs outperform their male counterparts in terms of business debt repayment in developing economies characterised by instability and significant institutional voids. Moreover, scholars appreciate the motivation of female entrepreneurs to achieve sustainable growth without unnecessary volatility, making female entrepreneurship more appealing for sustainable economic development (Prosser, 2015; Sajjad *et al.*, 2020). Thus, female entrepreneurship generally fosters inclusive and sustainable development by overcoming the grand challenges developing nations face.

Despite the economic development and social benefits of female entrepreneurship, the gender gap in the entrepreneurship phenomenon still exists. Women's initiation of entrepreneurial businesses and the growth and survival of these ventures remain at a lower level when compared to male-owned businesses. The emerging economies in South Asia are a case in point. The Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in South Asia are the backbone of the economy as they account for 96% of all enterprises. But women's contribution to these entrepreneurial businesses is limited because female ownership in Microenterprises accounts for 10%, and the Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) sector accounts only for 8% (Asian Development Bank, 2018). Since the gender gap in the entrepreneurial field stubbornly persists, scholars have emphasised the need for further studies to unlock the full potential of female entrepreneurship and foster more resilient

and inclusive growth (Ahl, 2004, 2006; Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017; Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020; McAdam, Brophy and Harrison, 2021).

2.3.5 Gaps in the Female Entrepreneurship Literature

The proliferation of female entrepreneurship has increasingly drawn scholarly attention to the field (Santos and Neumeyer, 2022; Deng *et al.*, 2025). Consequently, female entrepreneurship literature has evolved over time, and this advancement of knowledge in the area has contributed to establishing the discipline as a distinctive field. Research highlights the predominant role played by female entrepreneurship in eliminating inequalities and attaining women's empowerment (Xie & Wu, 2023), which is one of the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. For example, scholars advocate exploring female entrepreneurship in the context of developing economies because it can foster economic growth and social well-being (Cardella, Hernández-Sánchez and Sánchez-García, 2020; Corrêa *et al.*, 2022). In the era of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and digitalisation, a new sub-discipline of female entrepreneurship has emerged, namely, female digital entrepreneurship (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Deng *et al.*, 2025). For instance, researchers have pointed out that to gain a more nuanced understanding of female entrepreneurship, studies should scrutinise how digital technologies shape the experience of female entrepreneurship. Exploring areas such as female digital entrepreneurship in the context of developing nations can provide significant contributions to academia. However, it is also imperative to acknowledge the gaps in the existing literature related to the broader field of female entrepreneurship. Table 2.3 below briefly summarises the gaps in the extant literature related to female entrepreneurship.

Table 2.3 Gaps in the Literature Related to Female Entrepreneurship

Area	Call for Research
Empirical	• Studies on female entrepreneurship should go beyond the barriers to female entrepreneurship. Efforts should be taken to explore how women navigate the challenges for female entrepreneurs and how these women use diverse strategies to navigate these barriers (James, 2012; Corrêa *et al.*, 2022; Semkunde *et al.*, 2022; Trivedi and Petkova, 2022). • Though the significance of intersectionality in entrepreneurship research is acknowledged, there is no holistic or in-depth understanding of how intersectionality limits women's entrepreneurial behaviour (Asian Development Bank, 2018; Marlow and Dy, 2018; Johnson and Otto, 2019; Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020; Marlow, 2020; Ahl and Marlow, 2021).
Theoretical	• Academia was historically dominated by males, leading theories on business ventures to be viewed through a masculine lens. Existing research questions the applicability of these theories for exploring women in entrepreneurship, as they were developed with a focus on male-dominated business ventures (Mirchandani, 1989; Greene *et al.*, 2003; Deng *et al.*, 2025). • Researchers emphasise that research on women's entrepreneurship lacks a theoretical base and that most research revolves around empirical findings. Further, the imperativeness of developing entrepreneurial studies in light of a solid theoretical base is substantiated (Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Corrêa *et al.*, 2022; Lagrasta, Scozzi and Pontrandolfo, 2024). • Scholars have explicitly recognised the importance of incorporating feminist theories in female entrepreneurship research as it helps to understand how the structural conditions in society that favour male domination influence women entrepreneurs (Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012, 2021; Marlow, 2020).

Methods	• Qualitative research dominates female entrepreneurship studies, while other methodological approaches have been more restrained (Corrêa *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, it is imperative to use different methodological approaches when exploring female entrepreneurship (Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020; Lagrasta, Scozzi and Pontrandolfo, 2024; Deng *et al.*, 2025).
Context	• As women represent a more diverse community and because the context heavily binds their identity and role expectations, exploring female entrepreneurship needs to pay greater attention to the particular context (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2004; Ranasinghe, 2008; Marlow and McAdam, 2013; Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2015; Harrison, Leitch and Mcadam, 2015; Dean *et al.*, 2019; Welter, 2020; Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Welter and Baker, 2021; Jones *et al.*, 2025; Kamran *et al.*, 2025). • Despite the exponential growth in research on female entrepreneurship, the persistence of Western-centric biases in female entrepreneurship literature is still apparent (Ahl, 2004, 2006; Bardasi, Sabarwal and Terrell, 2011; Brush and Cooper, 2012; Javadian and Singh, 2012; Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2015; Panda, 2018; Dean *et al.*, 2019; Johnson and Otto, 2019; Cardella, Hernández-Sánchez and Sánchez-García, 2020; De Silva *et al.*, 2021; Kamran *et al.*, 2025). • Female entrepreneurship in South Asia has received limited academic attention. Specifically, studies related to women entrepreneurship are scant and there is more room for improvement (Venugopal and Viswanathan, 2021; Corrêa *et al.*, 2022; Franzke *et al.*, 2022).

2.4 Towards Female Digital Entrepreneurship (FDE)

Advancement of digital technologies marked the beginning of a transformative era for female entrepreneurship, which has garnered significant academic attention (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Deng *et al.*, 2025). More specifically, digital technologies ushered in an era where various disruptive ventures and pathways emerged, and women were able to overcome the traditional barriers they faced in the brick-and-mortar world (Molina-López *et al.*, 2021; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025; Deng *et al.*, 2025). The present-day business world, with influential brand names such as Apple, Airbnb, Amazon, Netflix, and Uber, provides living examples of how new digital tools and infrastructure have transformed entrepreneurship. Digital innovation has changed the entrepreneurial landscape in general and has a profound impact on women's entrepreneurship, which is yet to be explored (Sundermeier, Wessel and Davidson, 2018; Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; Kelly and McAdam, 2022; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025).

In general, scholars recognise digital entrepreneurship as a meritocratic landscape that helps women navigate contextual constraints and fosters opportunities for empowerment and professional growth (Marlow *et al*., 2019; McAdam *et al*., 2020; Sundermeier *et al*., 2018; Ughetto *et al*., 2020). However, research on digital technologies in female entrepreneurship is currently limited, and therefore, further research is essential to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how digital technologies influence female entrepreneurship.

Though female entrepreneurship and digital entrepreneurship have gained recent academic attention, studies related to these two areas remain mutually exclusive (Sundermeier, Wessel and Davidson, 2018). It would thus be beneficial to study female digital entrepreneurship (FDE) as an intersection of female and digital entrepreneurship (Sundermeier, Wessel and Davidson, 2018; Molina-López *et al.*, 2021). This is because studying digital and female entrepreneurship in an integrated manner will strengthen both theoretical knowledge and corporate practices related to the two fields.

2.4.1 Defining Digital Entrepreneurship

Digitalisation is the most significant change mankind has experienced in the recent past; present-day businesses have come to a point where they can no longer survive without the adoption of digital technologies and tools (Giones and Brem, 2017). For example, Morgan (2019) found that more than 70% of businesses worldwide are either engaged in digital transformation or are about to commence digital transformation, and 55% of startup businesses rely on digital business strategies. In the contemporary business world, the digitalisation of entrepreneurship is no longer an option; instead, it is a necessity for survival (Matoušková, 2022). Though digitalisation is indispensable in the contemporary entrepreneurial arena, there is a lack of definitional consensus on digital entrepreneurship (Giones and Brem, 2017; Steininger, 2018; Kraus *et al.*, 2019). Table 2.4 below illustrates how various scholars define digital entrepreneurship. Although there is no consensus on definitions, some common themes used in their explanations can be identified upon investigation.

Rather than perceiving digital entrepreneurship as a completely novel business function, scholars believe it is a subcategory of traditional entrepreneurship (Hull *et al.*, 2007; Le Dinh, 2018). Viewing digital entrepreneurship as a subset of entrepreneurship ensures that the fundamental aspects of entrepreneurship namely seizing opportunities, taking risks, creating new value, and achieving profit remain central to digital entrepreneurship. Digital entrepreneurship phenomena are inseparably linked to context, and hence, context embeddedness is essential when discussing digital entrepreneurship (Davidson and Vaast, 2010; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025). This relationship is explored by researchers who identified digital entrepreneurship as a sociomaterial practice where it is difficult to demarcate between technology, material objects, and society. This suggests that social actions and material objects actively influence and shape each other in meaningful ways (Orlikowski, 2007; Davidson and Vaast, 2010; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020). For example, Nambisan (2017) elaborated on sociomateriality, emphasising that individuals' recognition of entrepreneurial opportunities is influenced by their personal experiences in the digital realm. Since these personal experiences are shaped by context, it becomes evident that digital entrepreneurship is inherently a context-embedded phenomenon. Researchers highlighted that despite the extent to which technology is used, digital

entrepreneurship is an umbrella term covering all entrepreneurial initiatives that use digital technologies as enablers of new value creation or improvements to an extant value creation process (Hull *et al.*, 2007; Steininger, 2018). Furthermore, according to Nambisan (2017), digitalisation in entrepreneurship goes beyond the mere use of digital tools to enable entrepreneurship. Rather, it extensively revamps the entrepreneurial phenomenon as it leads to a complete transformation of uncertainty, which is the core of entrepreneurial pursuit. In fact, digitalisation in entrepreneurship has blurred the boundaries between the entrepreneurship process and the outcomes, and it has made the entrepreneurial agency more distributed (Nambisan, 2017; Sahut, Iandoli and Teulon, 2019).

Moreover, a review of the existing definitions highlights that digital entrepreneurship constitutes a distinct subcategory of entrepreneurship, encompassing a wide range of entrepreneurial initiatives that leverage digitalisation to varying degrees. Digitalisation leads to genetic modification of the business rather than surface-level changes, where digital entrepreneurship permeates a complete transformation of the uncertainty (Satalkina and Steiner, 2020).

Table 2.4 Key Definitions of Digital Entrepreneurship

Source	Definition
(Hull *et al.*, 2007, p. 293)	Digital entrepreneurship is a subcategory of entrepreneurship in which some or all of what would be physical in a traditional organisation has been digitised.
(Le Dinh, 2018, p. 1)	Digital entrepreneurship is defined as the reconciliation of traditional entrepreneurship with the new way of creating and doing business in the digital era.
(Davidson and Vaast, 2010, p. 8)	Business opportunities can be pursued by using digital technologies.
(Elia, Margherita and Passiante, 2020, p. 2)	New ventures and the transformation of existing businesses are possible by developing new digital technologies or experimenting with a novel usage of the same.
(Steininger, 2018)	Value creation can be done using information technology.

(Sahut, Iandoli and Teulon, 2019, p. 4)	The process of entrepreneurial creation of digital value is done using various socio-technical digital enablers to support effective acquisition, processing, distribution, and consumption of digital information.
(European Commission, 2015)	New ventures and transforming existing businesses can be done by developing novel digital technologies and/or novel usage of such technologies.
(Adam *et al.*, 2025)	Digital entrepreneurship can be defined as entrepreneurial activities that involve transforming an asset, service, or key aspect of a business into a digital format.

Note: The author developed this table based on extant literature

This study will rely on the definition of entrepreneurship proposed by Hull *et al.* (2007). According to Hull *et al.* (2007, p. 293), "*digital entrepreneurship is a subcategory of entrepreneurship in which some or all of what would be physical in a traditional organisation has been digitised*". Based on this definition, digital entrepreneurship covers a broad spectrum. This spectrum includes businesses which use digital technology as a facilitator to businesses which entirely rely on digital space (a digital native business) (Steininger, 2018). For example, using Facebook to sell cupcakes, where technology is used as a facilitator, and a business developing apps for a commercial purpose, which entirely relies on digital technologies, can both be considered digital businesses.

Hull *et al.* (2007) state that according to the degree of digitalisation, digital entrepreneurial businesses can be divided into three categories: mild, moderate, and extreme digital entrepreneurship. Such demarcation will depend on the extent to which the firm has digitalised its functions, such as marketing, selling goods and services, distribution, interactions with key external stakeholders, and other operations of the firm.

- Mild digital entrepreneurship → Adopting digital tools and technologies supplementary to conventional business.
- Moderate digital entrepreneurship → Digitalisation in terms of product, distribution, and other digital components, which could not survive without digital infrastructure.

- Extreme digital entrepreneurship → Extreme digital entrepreneurship involves digitally carrying out all business functions instead of partially using digital technology and infrastructure.

For this research, a definition that encompasses a broader spectrum of digital entrepreneurship is essential. This is because, to gain a deeper understanding of the social and economic impact of digital entrepreneurship, scholars need to study diverse digital entrepreneurial ventures rather than limit their research to business initiatives with a high technological drive.

2.4.2 Technology Affordances that Enable Transformation of Entrepreneurship

Fast-growing digital technologies transform how contemporary businesses are initiated, operated, and sustained. From an entrepreneurial perspective, various digital technologies, such as online payment gateways, cloud computing, crowdsourcing, crowdfunding, and social networking platforms, play a crucial role in facilitating cost savings, expanding market reach, obtaining low-cost financing, and enhancing networking opportunities (Aldrich, 2014; Nambisan, 2017; Sundermeier, Wessel and Davidson, 2018; Kraus *et al.*, 2019; Sahut, Iandoli and Teulon, 2019). For instance, Nambisan (2017) emphasised that digital technologies, as a whole, represent three distinct but intermingling elements, namely digital artefacts, platforms, and infrastructure. Together, these reshape conventional entrepreneurship by providing new, more effective ways to conduct entrepreneurial practices and generate outcomes. While these digital technologies and tools are vital for the success of any entrepreneurial venture, it is imperative to scrutinise how these digital technologies function as enablers for female entrepreneurial initiatives (Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023). When considering the various technological tools, platforms, and infrastructures that serve as enablers for entrepreneurs, it is noteworthy that, although digital technologies can play a transformative role, they are not ‘wonder drugs’ (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023). For example, the mere presence of digital devices or access to digital platforms will not guarantee that one can overcome the challenges or disadvantaged positionality. Recently, scholarly attention was sparked towards investigating how women entrepreneurs may overcome barriers that prevent them from being recognised as entrepreneurs. The findings of these studies explain how women entrepreneurs use digital affordances to navigate barriers (Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023).

Aligning with the sociomateriality approach, the Technology Affordances and Technology Constraint (TATC) theory (Hutchby, 2001; Majchrzak and Markus, 2012; Autio *et al.*, 2018) provides a viable explanation of how digital technologies pave the way for new entrepreneurial innovation, generating processes and outcomes tailored to the specific needs of users. According to Nambisan (2017, p. 1045), *digital affordances are action possibilities digital technology offers*. Digital affordances go beyond the features and functionalities of digital technologies, and if someone wants to benefit from digital technology, they must capitalise on the opportunities offered by the technologies (Majchrzak and Markus, 2012; Cabiddu, Carlo and Piccoli, 2014; Nambisan, 2017; Autio *et al.*, 2018; Nambisan, Wright and Feldman, 2019; Gregori and Holzmann, 2020). Thus, in the entrepreneurial context, the generation of new action possibilities depends on how the entrepreneur utilises technological features that will create new value creation (Meurer *et al.*, 2022; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023). Even technology with identical functionalities and features will provide different affordances to various entrepreneurial individuals. This variation occurs because the purpose for which they use the technology, their competency in using it, and the context in which they apply it differ significantly from one person to another (Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023). For instance, even though crowdfunding platforms offer similar functionalities for all potential entrepreneurs, the extent to which they engage with the particular platform will depend on the entrepreneurs' norms and attitudes about funding and technical capabilities regarding using it (Nambisan, 2017).

Digital affordances also help female entrepreneurs to overcome limitations by providing increased access to ideas, prospective customers, and resources in the institutional environment (Nambisan, 2017). It should be noted that digital affordances can come in different forms, such as entrepreneurs' ability to reach customers despite geographical limitations, learning affordances, opportunity creation affordances, networking affordances, and flexibility affordances, which enable women to overcome the contextual obstacles within the realm of digital technologies in entrepreneurship (Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023). Thus, affordances are derived from the complex interaction between technological tools and equipment and individuals with specific desires and goals (Gibson, 1979, cited in Nambisan, Wright and Feldman, 2019). While digital affordances provide a viable explanation of how women utilise digital technologies to overcome

the challenges they experience in entrepreneurship, more efforts should be made to investigate how contextual conditions shape women to engage in digital technologies and utilise digital affordances, which in turn can shape the context.

2.4.3 Cyberfeminism

Digital technology has transformed the social lives of individuals, and feminists have capitalised on the entwined nature of gender, digital technologies and evolving digital culture, which gave birth to "cyberfeminism" (Daniels, 2009; Paasonen, 2011; Deng *et al.*, 2025). Flanagan and Booth (2002) have stated that cyberfeminism revolves around various theories and debates that explain the interrelationship between gender and digital technologies. While cyberfeminism draws from various feminist theories (Rosser, 2005), it is primarily based on poststructural feminism, which views gender as a sociocultural construct and examines the relationship between gender and digital technology (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020; Deng *et al.*, 2025). Despite the common belief that digital technology creates a meritocratic space for repressive segments of society, including women (Plant, 1977), some strands of cyberfeminism take a more pluralistic approach. Therefore, researchers have emphasised the need to think beyond a singular form of cyberfeminism and acknowledge the existence of cyberfeminisms (Daniels, 2009; Goh and Thompson, 2021). This is because different strands of cyberfeminism(s) take different meanings and stances depending on the feminist theoretical lens they use as the base for their brand of cyberfeminism (Rosser, 2005), and cyberfeminists' perspective on the meritocracy offered by digital technologies (Daniels, 2009).

Plant (1997), one of the early cyberfeminism researchers, strongly opposed the conceptualisation of digital technology as a male domain and fraternised the idea that ICT provides many equal opportunities and meritocratic spaces for women to prosper. This ideology was acknowledged by many authors, who support the idea that digital technology can challenge traditional gender roles and create a more equitable environment for women, who are often marginalised (Daniels, 2009; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; Goh and Thompson, 2021). They argue that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) enables the achievement of gender equality (Paasonen, 2011; Podlas, 2000). While this popular

notion portrays ICT as a pathway for women to navigate the discrimination they face in the brick-and-mortar world, there is an oppositional school of thought to this perception. Scholars who oppose the popular view argue that women's lived experiences in the physical world are also mirrored in the digital sphere. The reasoning behind their argument is that even though gender dynamics and structural conditions in the physical world are not present in the digital sphere, women continue to experience disadvantages (Judy Wajcman, 2000; Gajjala, 2003; Daniels, 2009; Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017; Luo and Chan, 2021). Nonetheless, researchers started exploring digital entrepreneurship as an emancipatory pathway for women via the lens of cyberfeminism.

The impact of women's involvement in digital entrepreneurship on gender power dynamics cannot be studied without considering contextual conditions, as these dynamics are socially embedded (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025). Studying the specific contextual conditions of the Global South offers a significant opportunity to draw on cyberfeminism in a non-Western context (Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025; Kelly and McAdam, 2025). Claiming the significance of context and intersectionality in cyberfeminism research Gajjala (2003, p. 54) highlights,

> *if cyberfeminist agendas are to produce subversive countercultures or to succeed in changing existing technological environments so that they are empowering to women and men of lesser material and socio-cultural privilege the world over, it is important to examine how individuals and communities are situated within the complex global and local contexts mediated by unequal relations of power.*

Furthermore, when considering contextual conditions, it becomes evident that women's experiences cannot be universalised because the interconnectedness of various social descriptions shapes them. This highlights the importance of understanding women's experiences in digital entrepreneurship through the lens of intersectionality (Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017; Adikaram and Razik, 2023; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025). Throughout the past, researchers have emphasised the significance of accommodating the notion of intersectionality in cyberfeminism research by taking on board social ascriptions such as race,

class, ethnicity, age and urban-rural division. This is because the true potential of digital technologies to provide meritocratic space for marginalised communities will depend on the lived experience of the particular individual which is shaped by the intersection of multiple social ascriptions (Gajjala, 2003; Rosser, 2005; Daniels, 2009). Since cyberfeminism extends beyond the abstract integration of digital technology and women, it necessitates understanding how technology and gender are intertwined with the political and structural hierarchies and power relationships within a particular context.

2.4.4 FDE as a Pathway towards Emancipation

With the recent proliferation of digital technologies, women have started to engage in digital entrepreneurship, and scholars have begun to explore the impact of digital advancements on women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship (Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; Deng *et al.*, 2025). Perceiving digital entrepreneurship as a pathway to navigate the barriers experienced by women in the brick-and-mortar world, recent studies on FDE explore the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship for women, which is an evolving yet underexplored area (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025).

2.4.5 Concept of Emancipation

"The concept of emancipation refers to an entity's liberation from control, dependence, restraint, confinement, restriction, repression, slavery, or domination" (Susen, 2015, p. 1024). The concept of emancipation dates back to the philosophical ideologies of Carl Marx, who primarily focused on attaining equality in dealings related to external environmental aspects (Roy, Mohapatra and Banerjee, 2022). The word emancipation has a Latin origin, and the English meaning of emancipation refers to attaining a better state by setting free an individual from existing dependencies (Susen, 2015). Emancipation is a relative phenomenon because individuals' freedom is based on their experiences. Rindova, Barry and Ketchen (2009), who view entrepreneurship as emancipation, emphasised how individuals' entrepreneurial efforts can help them overcome or eliminate the environmental constraints imposed on them, elevating their status from the current situation to a better one. Furthermore, the exploration of emancipation should be perceived as a process that involves individuals disrupting the status quo, which limits their pathway, and

uplifting their status by transforming gender power dynamics (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009; Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018; Trivedi and Petkova, 2022).

Based on Rindova, Barry and Ketchen (2009), to understand emancipation as a process comprehensively, one needs to explore the phenomenon from three perspectives: seeking autonomy, authorship, and declaration. The thrust of "autonomy" is about attaining freedom from the diverse constraints imposed on the individual by the environment (Atarah *et al.*, 2023). Especially when considering the situation of women, conventional gender norms, together with many other environmental conditions, impose restrictions which make women victims of exploitation and domination. Moreover, these limitations inhibit women from fulfilling their true desires and unleashing their full potential (Jennings and Brush, 2013; Panda, 2018). Thus, scholars perceive that the economic benefits women gain from the business and the agency associated with entrepreneurship will enable them to work on their terms without being confined to conventional roles (Yu and Cui, 2019). The efforts to break free from the extant constraints and reach new heights pave the way for the next aspect of emancipation, namely "authoring" (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009). Authoring involves establishing relationships, structures, and guidelines for interaction that maintain and may even improve the potential for change within a specific entrepreneurial project (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009; Trivedi and Petkova, 2022; Atarah and Nolan, 2023). To bring about positive change by overcoming existing constraints, an individual needs a deep understanding of the power structures within society. Additionally, they should build relationships with other social actors and utilise resources and time, keeping their intention for change at the forefront of these connections. For instance, in Hewamanne's (2020) work, it is evident how entrepreneurial women employ subtle strategies, such as hiring family members as employees, maintaining a healthy relationship with the chief monks of the village, and making lavish donations to community projects, in order to become empowered. Furthermore, in most instances, it is evident that women work for extended hours to fulfil their responsibilities as dutiful wives and mothers in order to gain social legitimacy for female entrepreneurship (Surangi, 2018; Hewamanne, 2020; De Silva *et al.*, 2021). However, engaging in such physically and mentally exhausting practices is criticised because they make the situation of women worse rather than elevating their status (Ahl and Marlow, 2021). Further, "making declarations" is also an essential aspect of emancipation. These are clear and direct actions that express the actor's

intentions to create change. It requires unambiguous statements articulating an individual's intentions to change (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009; Trivedi and Petkova, 2022; Benali and Villesèche, 2024). This requires explicitly expressing the desire to bring about change through an entrepreneur's verbal and physical actions. For example, in an attempt to uplift their status and bring about positive change, women may take action against normative expectations and challenge prevailing power structures. However, such actions or 'declarations' may lead to societal confrontation and backlash. Therefore, effectively addressing confrontations with strong strategies and conviction is crucial for making a lasting impression.

When exploring the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship, a holistic understanding of the process of liberating individuals from the extant constraints and creating new, favourable conditions is necessary (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018; Atarah *et al.*, 2023). For this purpose, it is essential to explore the factors that support female digital entrepreneurship (FDE) despite existing constraints. Efforts should focus on investigating the higher-order outcomes that women achieve through their involvement in digital entrepreneurship, emphasising not only their personal improvements but also the changes in the social order that result from their engagement in FDE. Such efforts towards attaining a holistic understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE shed light on the reciprocal relationship between female digital entrepreneurial actions and the context. As highlighted by previous scholars, context and entrepreneurship are interdependent, where entrepreneurs are not only influenced by contextual conditions but are active change agents who transform contexts through their engagement in entrepreneurship (Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2015; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Welter, 2020). Therefore, it is timely to explore both perspectives to attain a holistic understanding of FDE's emancipatory potential.

2.4.6 Emancipatory Potential of FDE

Since FDE is a novel area that has received limited academic attention thus far, only a few studies have been conducted exploring the emancipatory potential of FDE (Luo and Chan, 2021; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Deng *et al.*, 2025). Those studies that have investigated the emancipatory potential of FDE have reported mixed findings. Accordingly, some studies align with the popular ideology that digital entrepreneurship provides a liberating pathway for women (Sorgner and

Krieger-Boden, 2017; Sundermeier, Wessel and Davidson, 2018; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Manello *et al.*, 2020; Alhothali and Al-Dajani, 2022; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025). However, others have argued that digital entrepreneurship is a resource-consuming pathway, which reproduces or worsens offline social hierarchies rather than working as a liberating pathway (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017; Marlow and Dy, 2018; Luo and Chan, 2021; Murray, Carter & Spence, 2024). Entrepreneurship and information systems/technology (IT/IS) are both socially positioned as male-dominated fields, which portray an image that men are more likely to succeed in the IT sector than their female counterparts (Trauth *et al.*, 2004; Trauth and Quesenberry, 2006; Adikaram and Razik, 2023). Thus, the social positioning of entrepreneurship and the identification of information technology as male-centric professions subjects women in digital entrepreneurship to a double-gender bind (Adikaram and Razik, 2023). In analysing the contrasting perspectives on the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship for female entrepreneurs, it becomes evident that the current body of literature is not sufficiently robust enough to capture this phenomenon fully. This underscores the necessity for further inquiries and research to deepen our understanding.

2.4.7 Extant Studies on Female Digital Entrepreneurship

Research on female digital entrepreneurship is scant, and this has been noted by Kelly and McAdam (2022, p. 1)*"we have neither a complete understanding of the phenomenon of women's digital entrepreneurship nor a comprehensive understanding of how uncertainties manifest and are negotiated by women in digital entrepreneurial contexts".* The rapid adoption of digital technologies, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, has presented businesses with new opportunities for growth and innovation. As a result, FDE has experienced impressive growth in this dynamic landscape (Elam *et al.*, 2021), which calls for more studies on the area.

Conducting research related to an area of FDE will require reviewing what has already been studied in the area. This will reveal what has not been studied and what requires further academic attention, contributing to the advancement of discipline. Table 2.5 presents a detailed overview of previous studies on FDE, emphasising key themes, methodologies, and findings. This

synthesis will enable the identification of gaps in the extant literature that can be addressed through the present study. However, as FDE remains a relatively nascent research domain, identifying gaps within the extant literature necessitates extending beyond the boundaries of FDE itself. A thorough examination of the existing gaps in female and digital entrepreneurship is essential for developing an integrated platform that addresses current theoretical and empirical deficiencies related to FDE.

Table 2.5 Previous Studies Related to Female Digital Entrepreneurship

Source	Nature of the Study	Purpose	Outcomes of the Study
(McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020)	The study explored the lived experiences of Saudi Arabian women entrepreneurs through a qualitative interpretive methodology, which generates a contextual understanding of digital entrepreneurship's potential for emancipation.	The study's primary purpose was to explore the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship for affluent, financially stable Saudi women who are constrained by other socio-cultural and legally enforced gender segregation.	Findings indicate that women in Saudi Arabia are leveraging digital entrepreneurship to transform and redefine their identities. The flexibility offered by digital businesses, due to fewer predefined spatial and temporal boundaries, the ability to interact with stakeholders through fewer physical interactions, and minimal commuting, make it more conducive for female entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the women who circumvented the hurdles and pursued their entrepreneurial goals perceive that their social recognition and acceptance have improved due to their achievements as entrepreneurs.
(McAdam, Crowley and	The study adopted an interpretive case study methodology where semi-	The study's purpose was to explore the potential of digital entrepreneurship to overcome the	The study discovered four significant challenges for female digital entrepreneurs and their responses towards them. Discriminatory cultural

Harrison, 2019)	structured interviews were conducted with six female digital entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia to develop narrative biographies based on these women's experiences.	barriers experienced by women in emerging economies with socio-cultural institutional voids and to examine how these female digital entrepreneurs act as catalysts of change that alter socio-cultural conditions.	and legal practices were overcome by working on digital platforms and utilising a male secretary; not having mentors and role models was addressed through moving from conventional to pragmatic networking; trust issues related to online businesses were negated through intensive engagement in social media and using social medial influencers; and conflicting role expectations from the family and society were overcome through sharing their entrepreneurial wins with family.
Martinez Dy et al., (2017)	The study took an interpretive approach. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-six women digital entrepreneurs in the UK, whose social positions were further affected by ethnicity, race, and class.	The study focused on challenging the notion that digitalisation offers a meritocratic space for female entrepreneurs by emphasising how intersectionality and positionality in the brick-and-mortar world are mirrored in the digital arena.	The disadvantaged position experienced by women entrepreneurs in the offline world, which results from an intersection of gender, race, and class, will also be reproduced in the digital world. Findings challenged the idea that the Internet is a neutral platform for entrepreneurship. Offline gender disparities derived from marked bodies, social position, and related resource limitations are both created and perpetuated in the online environment.

(Dy, Martin and Marlow, 2018)	The study was influenced by a critical realist perspective. For the comparative analysis, female digital entrepreneurs from the UK and Scotland were segmented into three paired cases. Data were collected from 26 female digital entrepreneurs who reflected different social positionalities.	The study focused on critiquing the popular notion of digital entrepreneurship as a leveller, exploring its entwined nature, social positionality, structural conditions, and conditions inducing entrepreneurial agency.	The study reveals that structural conditions, entrepreneurial agencies, and social positionality in the physical world influence the extent to which female digital entrepreneurship liberates women. Even though the Internet appears to offer a range of benefits, including low cost, broader market access, networking, and e-value creation, the extent to which these benefits are attained depends on women's socio-economic class, IT skills and knowledge, household support, gender, and other social ascriptions related to stereotyping.
(Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017)	To investigate the role of social media in negating gender-centric barriers, 22 female digital entrepreneurs, predominantly involved in digital marketing, digital media, and creative fields, were interviewed in depth.	The study aimed to investigate how women's social media presence as female digital entrepreneurs is bound by the social role expected of a female and how their presence on digital platforms places them in a double disadvantaged position.	The study's findings substantiated that even though it is pivotal for female digital entrepreneurs to mark their presence in social media, they have to bear the burden of assuming the roles of an aggressive entrepreneur and a traditional woman while they mark their presence on social media platforms. Findings reveal that women are restricted to soft promotions, incurring extra effort and cost to

			build up social interactions. It also highlights the challenges women face when demarcating their private and public lives.
(Manello *et al.*, 2020)	The study analysed secondary data related to manufacturing businesses in Italy. Data Envelope Analysis was used to determine the impact of networking on the economic performance of female-led businesses.	The study conducted a comparative investigation into the impact of networking on the economic performance of businesses led by female leaders with varying degrees of digitalisation.	Research has shown that companies with women in senior positions, such as CEOs, tend to have lower efficiency scores. However, when these companies make use of networking opportunities, their performance significantly improves. This suggests that female networking can lead to better outcomes. This positive impact is even more pronounced in workplaces and networks with a higher concentration of women, as well as in innovative and digital sectors.
(Alhothali and Al-Dajani, 2022)	The study employed a qualitative, longitudinal approach, collecting data from eight female digital entrepreneurs in the Western Region of Saudi Arabia through semi-structured, in-	The purpose of the study was to explore the resilience of female digital microbusinesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus was mainly on investigating the role of digitalisation and the emotions and motives of the female digital	The findings of the study revealed that digital micro businesses owned by women who embraced digital technologies before the pandemic became more resilient during the Covid-19 pandemic as they could use digital technologies to navigate the adversities without delay. Those female digital entrepreneurs thrived

	depth interviews conducted before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.	entrepreneurs that made them resilient during the pandemic.	because of their passion and positive attitudes. These enabled them to be resilient during the pandemic and perceive the pandemic as a blessing in disguise. They utilised the idle time to explore new products, strengthen their relationships with customers, and diversify and expand their businesses.
(Shukla *et al.*, 2021)	This is descriptive research that took a quantitative approach. Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire from 246 female university students pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.	The study's purpose was to explore the impact of ICT skills on female entrepreneurs' intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship.	The study revealed mixed findings on the impact of ICT skills on entrepreneurial intention among potential female digital entrepreneurs. Of the three types of ICT skills, operational, informational, and creative, informational skills are deemed to impact entrepreneurial intention positively. The findings further revealed that individuals from business family backgrounds have more positive attitudes towards engaging in entrepreneurial ventures.
(Luo and Chan, 2021)	The study employed a qualitative approach. Forty in-depth interviews were	The study involved a critical examination of the reproduction of gender subordination in the digital	Digital entrepreneurship is a gendered phenomenon influenced by structural conditions in the brick-and-mortar world, which also affect

	conducted with individuals involved in digital entrepreneurship within coworking spaces, including female entrepreneurs, coworking space managers, and other relevant professionals in Shenzhen, a highly entrepreneurial city in China.	entrepreneurship context and how gender-centric practices in newly emerging coworking spaces contribute to the further subordination of female digital entrepreneurs, in light of the feminist geography perspective.	female entrepreneurs in a virtual context. The gendering of digital entrepreneurship is further augmented due to the gender-centric practices that persist in coworking spaces. Findings show that female businesses are confined to low-growth, and stable traditional sectors hinder their potential to get recruited to aggressive coworking spaces. Further, due to female role expectations and female segregation, women digital entrepreneurs do not benefit from the knowledge spillovers, networking, and sense of community, which are identified as the core benefits of coworking spaces.
(Yu and Cui, 2019)	The study took a qualitative approach to capture the lived experiences of female digital entrepreneurs who are subordinated not only by gender but also by other social ascriptions. To collect the data, 26 interviews were conducted	The study focuses on the impacts of e-commerce in rural China on traditional gender roles and power dynamics within a competitive market economy. Efforts were taken to explore the extent to which female entrepreneurs' participation in digital entrepreneurial activities enables a	The study revealed that digital entrepreneurial initiatives by women in Taobao villages (Alibaba's initiative to encourage e-commerce adoption in rural areas) provided economic empowerment to marginalised women, enabling them to enhance their relationships with immediate families. However, the economic benefits of digital entrepreneurship were

	(both one-on-one and group), and multiple case studies were analysed.	change in the conventional gendered and patriarchal subordination they experience.	insufficient to change societal expectations of gender roles.
(Chakraborty and Biswal, 2023)	A cross-sectional study was conducted by collecting data from 105 female entrepreneurs who used social media platforms for business purposes, via a disseminated self-directed questionnaire. The stimulus–organ—response (S-O-R) framework and uses and gratification theory (UGT) were used to derive a conceptual framework.	The study aimed to explore the impact of social media participation among females on their intention to engage in digital entrepreneurial activities and the psychological empowerment of these individuals.	The study revealed that women's use of social media platforms for sharing information (informational), responding to other participants on the platform by analysing their psychological tendency (attitudinal), and sharing their favourable judgements about digital entrepreneurship (attitudinal) positively affects their intention to engage in viral marketing.
(Kelly and McAdam, 2022)	The research employed a qualitative, interpretive approach and collected data from nine female digital entrepreneurs through in-depth narrative interviews. The women's experience in	The study aimed to explore the transitional experiences of women who transition from other occupations to digital entrepreneurship and the strategies they use to navigate the virtual world.	The findings suggest that women in the corporate sector initially experience dissatisfaction with their jobs, which can lead to a sense of disconnection. In the liminal stage, female digital entrepreneurs often feel "neither here nor there," facing financial constraints, the risks of entrepreneurship, feelings of otherness,

	transitioning towards digital entrepreneurial careers was explained through a liminality lens.		and blurred work-life boundaries. They enhance their skills, knowledge, and resilience to navigate these challenges while developing new work-life balance strategies. In the final phase, or post-liminality, they experience greater happiness, well-being, and a strengthened sense of belonging.
(Molina-López *et al.*, 2021)	This quantitative study collected data from 161 female digital entrepreneurs in Spain. The data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire, and causal relationships were tested using structural equation modelling (SEM).	The study's purpose was to explore the role of entrepreneurial education and training in circumventing the barriers faced by female digital entrepreneurs.	The study found that entrepreneurial education and training immensely enhance female digital entrepreneurs' self-efficacy, enabling women to overcome the gender-centric barriers they experience.
(Hull *et al.*, 2023)	This quantitative study was conducted by collecting data from digital entrepreneurs and finance managers of digital	The study explored how digital entrepreneurship enables women in developing economies to sharpen their innovativeness in comparison to their male counterparts.	The study's findings substantiated a positive relationship between the innovativeness of female digital entrepreneurs and the degree of digitalisation of their entrepreneurial ventures.

	entrepreneurial businesses in Ghana and Vietnam.		
(Wang *et al.*, 2023)	This quantitative study collected data from 3125 Kickstarter fundraising campaigns launched by female entrepreneurs in different countries and analysed the data using natural language processing analytic techniques.	The study was conducted to empirically investigate how female entrepreneurs' online gender identities impact their success in crowdfunding in the digital context.	The study revealed that online gender identities significantly impact women's accomplishments in crowdfunding, and women who showcase high masculinity on online platforms are more successful in crowdfunding projects.
(Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023)	This qualitative study collected data through interviews with 18 female digital entrepreneurs in Beijing and Shanghai and analysed them thematically.	The purpose of the study was to explore how digital affordances enable women to bypass the challenges.	The study's findings substantiated the four digital affordances— virtual networking, virtual learning, opportunity creation, and business expansion— that enable women to overcome the cultural barriers to entrepreneurship.
(Kelly and McAdam, 2025)	The study examines the experiences of 28 educated, white female professionals who founded independent online businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The	The study aimed to examine how women became digital entrepreneurs in the challenging context of the pandemic, and understand, experience, and negotiate	The study's findings highlight how women utilise post-feminism to navigate their journeys in digital entrepreneurship. It predominantly focuses on three main ways they make sense of their experiences: choosing to be digital entrepreneurs, which shapes and reshapes their

	study took the form of a qualitative study and relied on feminist poststructuralist methodology to analyse the experiences of these individuals.	postfeminism and discourses about gender.	identities as female digital entrepreneurs, and deal with the pressures of living up to the expectations of societal norms. The study concluded that digital entrepreneurship is not a true meritocratic space.
Best et al., (2025)	The study was qualitative in nature and was based on semi-structured interviews with 30 female digital entrepreneurs who own and operate digital businesses in three Caribbean countries. The themes that emerged from the interviews were the basis for the analysis.	This study aimed to investigate how digital technologies can create valuable opportunities for female entrepreneurs in the unique context of Caribbean islands.	The study's findings substantiate that digital technologies provide opportunities for female entrepreneurs to transform their businesses and overcome contextual barriers through enhanced information sharing, role modelling, mentoring, and networking.

Source: The author compiled this based on the extant literature

When examining past studies related to female digital entrepreneurship (FDE), it becomes clear that the research primarily centers on several key areas: the transition process that women experience when digitalizing their businesses or starting digital ventures (Kelly and McAdam, 2022, 2023, 2025), the view of digital entrepreneurship as a means of emancipation for women (Martinez Dy, Martin and Marlow, 2017; Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018; Yu and Cui, 2019; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020; Chakraborty and Biswal, 2023; Hull *et al.*, 2023; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025), the various challenges faced by female digital entrepreneurs (Wang *et al.*, 2023; Molina-López *et al.*, 2021; Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017), the influence of the contextual environment (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, ,Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025), and the impact of entrepreneurial background on these women's experiences (Shukla *et al.*, 2021).

The topicality of revolutionary and transformative advancements in digital technologies is mainly associated with their capacity to serve as a great leveller (Martin and Wright, 2005; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025). Given this optimistic perspective on digital entrepreneurship, contemporary discussions focus on the emancipatory potential of female digital entrepreneurship, an emergent area of study (Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017; Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; Deng *et al.*, 2025). When reviewing the extant literature, it is evident that the emancipatory potential of FDE is a growing body of literature, where findings are inconclusive (Alhothali and Al-Dajani, 2022; McAdam *et al.*, 2019; McAdam *et al.*, 2020; Ughetto *et al*., 2020; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). The limited number of studies and the lack of consensus in their findings underscore the need for further research exploring the phenomenon in various contexts and by taking intersectional differences into account (Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020; Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025; Deng *et al.*, 2025). The emancipatory potential of female entrepreneurship has long been a topic of discussion (Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2015), but recently, attention has shifted towards the emancipatory potential of FDE. Studies on FDE focused on the perspective of "emancipation," viewing digital entrepreneurship as a pathway to navigate the barriers faced by women in the brick-and-mortar world (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). This approach will offer a more nuanced and theoretically grounded understanding of the field. Exploring the emancipatory

potential of FDE in a contextualised manner will also address the call by Welter (2020) to examine the impact of female engagement in entrepreneurship towards enacting a particular context.

Furthermore, scholars have highlighted the importance of viewing emancipation as a process when examining the potential for FDE to bring about social change (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018; Rindova *et al.,* 2009; Trivedi and Petkova, 2022; Atarah and Nolan, 2023). This perspective requires a thorough exploration of the journey of female digital entrepreneurs from feeling restricted to initiating positive social change by overcoming obstacles and engaging in FDE. For instance, Rindova, Barry and Ketchen (2009) provide a vivid picture of the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurship. They elucidated how individuals who do not fall under the domain of conventional entrepreneurs explore entrepreneurship and how the initiatives taken up by such unique segments in society aim to bring about positive change in the world around them (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009). As emphasised by Atarah and Nolan (2023), although existing research highlights the potential of FDE to improve the conditions of women, there is a lack of understanding regarding the specific processes through which women attain this freedom and improve their conditions. Therefore, attaining a more comprehensive understanding of the emancipatory process is essential. Hence, more comprehensive studies in this area will better understand how FDE can effectively function as a catalyst for change, renegotiate gender norms, and gain social legitimisation. Such research will provide valuable insights and contribute to advancing gender equality initiatives. The present study addresses this important gap by exploring the comprehensive process of women's pathways to emancipation through digital entrepreneurship. It is vital to investigate the changing factors that reinforce FDE despite the double-gender bind and to explore how women's engagement in FDE transforms social order to promote women's status, a topic not previously explored by scholars who viewed FDE as a means of emancipation.

Moreover, the importance of contextualising entrepreneurship research has been highlighted in the extant literature (Welter, 2004; Mari, Poggesi and De Vita, 2016; Welter *et al.*, 2017; Welter and Baker, 2021; Jones *et al.*, 2025). In the case of FDE, where gendering, entrepreneurial engagement, and involvement in digital technologies are inherently context-bound, the behaviour

of FDE can be better understood by studying it as a context-bound phenomenon (Jennings and Brush, 2013; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020; Trauth and Connolly, 2021; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025). This approach will enhance the understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities that women face in their entrepreneurial journeys, thereby enriching the overall discourse surrounding their pathways to emancipation (Welter, 2011; Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2015; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Wadhwani *et al.*, 2020). Despite affording greater independence from temporal and spatial contexts, digital technologies do not diminish the pivotal role of context in entrepreneurship. Instead, they fundamentally alter how entrepreneurs engage with and navigate contextual factors. This shift underscores the importance of conducting additional studies on digital entrepreneurship within diverse contexts (Welter and Baker, 2021). The manifestation of the term emancipation is more of a relative phenomenon where the pursuit of freedom and autonomy is evaluated relative to the extant status quo (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009). Therefore, when exploring the emancipatory potential of FDE, female entrepreneurs' experiences must be explored based on the context in which they exist (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025). Scholars have emphasised the importance of recognising the two-way interaction between FDE and the surrounding context when exploring entrepreneurship in a context-bound manner (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Welter and Baker, 2021). Traditionally, the focus has been on how different contextual conditions reinforce or restrain female entrepreneurs. It is now acknowledged that to attain a more comprehensive understanding of the contextual embeddedness of FDE, it is imperative to explore the impact of contextual conditions on women's propensity for digital entrepreneurship and how their involvement in this field can shape these contexts (Welter, 2011; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Welter and Baker, 2021). For instance, women who navigate highly gendered contexts can influence and potentially improve the contexts that were previously perceived as unsupportive. Therefore, to understand the emancipatory potential offered by digital entrepreneurship, it is essential to explore the FDE by considering contextual conditions, which helps bridge the gaps in existing literature.

In addition, it is evident that literature on the emancipatory potential of FDE is mainly confined to the Global North (Atarah et al., 2023; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Best, Lassalle and

Nicolopoulou, 2025; Deng et al., 2025; Kelly and McAdam, 2025), whose experience cannot be compared with the experience of a woman from the Global South. Apart from these studies from the Global North, there are a handful of studies that focus on economically affluent Saudi Arabia (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020; Alhothali and Al-Dajani, 2022) or Asian giants like China and India as empirical sites because they boast of the world's largest economies (Yu and Cui, 2019; Luo and Chan, 2021; Shukla *et al.*, 2021). Women's experience from such flourishing or fast-paced, developed Middle Eastern or Asian economies is incomparable to that of women from third-world, less developed economies, which have lesser power and access to global power plays and resource allocation. Instead, it is crucial to consider third-world women's experiences from the perspectives of postcolonial feminism or third-world feminism, which consider the unique historical and cultural contexts these women face. This approach helps highlight the specific challenges and realities they encounter, which differ significantly from those of women in more privileged contexts (Mohanty, 2002; Mishra, 2013; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2014; Ranasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2021; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025). Female entrepreneurs in developing countries confront distinct challenges, primarily attributable to limited opportunities, resource constraints, entrenched patriarchy and unique obstacles (Panda, 2018).

In addition to these general challenges, specific challenges can arise from the double-gendered nature of digital entrepreneurship. For example, Adikaram and Razik (2023) claim that STEM women entrepreneurs face numerous challenges when starting and running their businesses. These include limited access to networks and opportunities, procedural hurdles, staffing difficulties, and challenges in securing financing. Additionally, a lack of understanding and support from family and society, difficulties in balancing work and personal life, and issues related to legitimacy can further hinder their entrepreneurial efforts. Thus, to gain a more holistic and realistic understanding of the diverse experiences of female digital entrepreneurs in the developing world, it is imperative to study the phenomenon by contextualising it within these countries. Hence, Sri Lanka, a third-world country with unique contextual conditions, is an ideal empirical site to study FDE. Thus far, very limited academic attention has been paid to FDE in Sri Lanka

(De Silva *et al.*, 2021), and to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no studies have been conducted to gain a holistic understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE in Sri Lanka.

When exploring FDE in relation to contextual conditions, such as economic and socio-cultural contexts, intersectionality has emerged as a pivotal area warranting significant academic attention. The need for an intersectionality lens in female entrepreneurship research has been widely acknowledged (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Stead, 2017; Marlow, 2020). Intersectionality is also a means of better investigating the differences among women when researching women in ICT careers (Riemenschneider and Armstrong, 2021; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Academic researchers have also emphasised the impetus for intersectional analyses of women's STEM entrepreneurial activities (Owalla, Nyanzu and Vorley, 2021; Treanor, 2022; Adikaram and Razik, 2023). To achieve a more holistic and realistic understanding of the oppression faced by women, it is essential to move beyond a singular focus on gender as a secondary social identification. This necessitates an exploration of how multiple identities shaped by various social ascriptions, including class, caste, and ethnic group, etc., contribute to the construction of oppression. When ascertaining the emancipatory potential of FDE in a contextual setting, researchers emphasised that it is imperative to examine whether the multifaceted social ascriptions intersect with gender to ameliorate or worsen the situation of women entrepreneurs in digital spaces (Dy, Martin and Marlow, 2018; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). In the Sri Lankan context, class, race, and gender issues are interconnected in unique ways, and as a result, scholars should move beyond generalisations about Sri Lankan women (Surangi, 2018; Adikaram and Razik, 2023). Thus, studies focusing on these intersectional influences are imperative to gaining a deeper understanding of the social structures and challenges specific to Sri Lanka. It is worth noting that FDE, as a liberation pathway, is relative to the constraints experienced, and intersectionality plays a central role in exploring its emancipatory potential.

Research on FDE emphasises the application of theoretical perspectives as crucial for enhancing the depth and analytical rigour of studies within this domain. Prior scholars specifically note that a substantial body of empirical research conducted in an atheoretical manner may not effectively contribute to the advancement of female entrepreneurship as a distinct and specialised

area of study (Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Marlow, 2020). Similarly, authors who have conducted studies on ICT careers and gender have also emphasised the use of theory to gain a more holistic understanding of the phenomena studied (Trauth and Quesenberry, 2006; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Addressing this scholarly requirement, which underscores the significance of integrating theoretical perspectives to solidify the theoretical foundation while enhancing analytical depth of research in the field of female entrepreneurship, this research will explore the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship among South Asian women relying on a solid theoretical base to broaden the understanding of female digital entrepreneurship.

As the research field gradually develops, it is essential to incorporate methodological diversity to ensure the legitimacy of FDE as an independent field. Current literature on FDE is primarily focused on interpretivism and qualitative methods. As a result, there is a noticeable lack of diversity in the epistemological and methodological approaches followed by research (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). While qualitative research plays a central role when exploring a novel field with a limited understanding of the area, as the field matures, it is imperative to conduct quantitative studies to ensure the generalisability of findings and to provide empirical rigour. For example, Ughetto et al. (2020) emphasised that current research on FDE is mainly confined to qualitative studies. They consider it important to adopt diverse and innovative methodologies to attain a more nuanced understanding of FDE with sufficient academic rigour. Thus, to further advance FDE's research agenda, researchers should conduct studies using diverse methodologies.

Overall, the present study seeks to proactively address the identified gaps in the extant literature to attain a comprehensive understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE. Even though positioning FDE as a site of negotiation, transformation, and potential emancipation first requires defining its scope and recognizing its conceptual boundaries as FDE represents a novel domain there remains **no definitional consensus** on what constitutes FDE. For the purpose of this study, *FDE is conceptualized as women starting new businesses, where some or all of the traditional physical aspects of an organization have been digitized.* This **working definition** not only provides conceptual clarity for the present research but also serves as a **contribution to knowledge**, offering a basis for future scholarly inquiry and empirical investigation in this

emerging field. Further this study provides a distinct contribution by advancing a contextually grounded definition of FDE. The study ensures that contextual conditions are considered when exploring how women's participation in digital entrepreneurship influences gender power dynamics. To address the need for a deeper exploration of emancipation as a process, the study will explore the factors that enable women to navigate digital entrepreneurial pathways and investigate how women's involvement activates social change. Furthermore, by addressing the need to consider contextual conditions when examining how women's participation in digital entrepreneurship influences gender power dynamics, the study will pay particular attention to the unique contextual conditions in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is a resource-constrained South Asian country where patriarchal norms and practices are still dominant. Thus, exploring female digital entrepreneurs' experiences will address the need to go beyond the Global North and investigate FDE in the Global South. Acknowledging contextual influences reveals that women's experiences are not uniform but are shaped by the interplay of various social identities. This underscores the need to analyse women's experiences in digital entrepreneurship through the framework of intersectionality, which will be addressed through this study. Furthermore, by addressing the gaps in the existing literature regarding methodological diversity and theoretical applications, this research will utilise a mixed-methods approach and established theories to study the phenomenon. Ultimately, with the intention of bridging the gap in extant literature and broadening the research scope of FDE, this research critically explores the emancipatory potential of FDE in the Sri Lankan context.

2.5 Theoretical lenses for participation and emancipation through FDE

2.5.1 Introduction

The theoretical lenses outlined in this section provide the conceptual foundations for understanding a process view of the emancipatory potential of FDE. Rather than treating emancipation through FDE as a static outcome, this study views it as an evolving process that unfolds through stages of engagement, participation, and transformation. Accordingly, the selected theoretical perspectives help to attain a more theoretically grounded understanding of how women engage, navigate, and transform the digital entrepreneurial space while negotiating social, cultural, and technological boundaries. At the inception, Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice (RCTP) provides a robust framework to understand how conventional gendered expectations and social norms shape women's experiences in the workforce (Refer appendix G for wide array of theories that were used to discuss about the prejudice towards the women). The individual differences theory of gender and IT (IDTGIT) enables an understanding of how personal and environmental factors interact to determine women's engagement in FDE. The lens of intersectionality enables the recognition of the diversity of women's experiences by emphasizing how FDE engagement is shaped as gender intersects with other social ascriptions. Employing these theoretical lenses facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE as a process.

Figure 2.2 serves as a critical visual roadmap, clearly delineating the study's core objectives and their interconnected theoretical pathways. This conceptual model is centred on conceptualizing FDE as a holistic emancipatory process where figure structures across exploration of change factors driving FDE engagement; a subsequent analysis of the role of intersectional differences in shaping individual entrepreneurial experiences, and the exploration of the broader societal-level changes catalyzed by FDE.

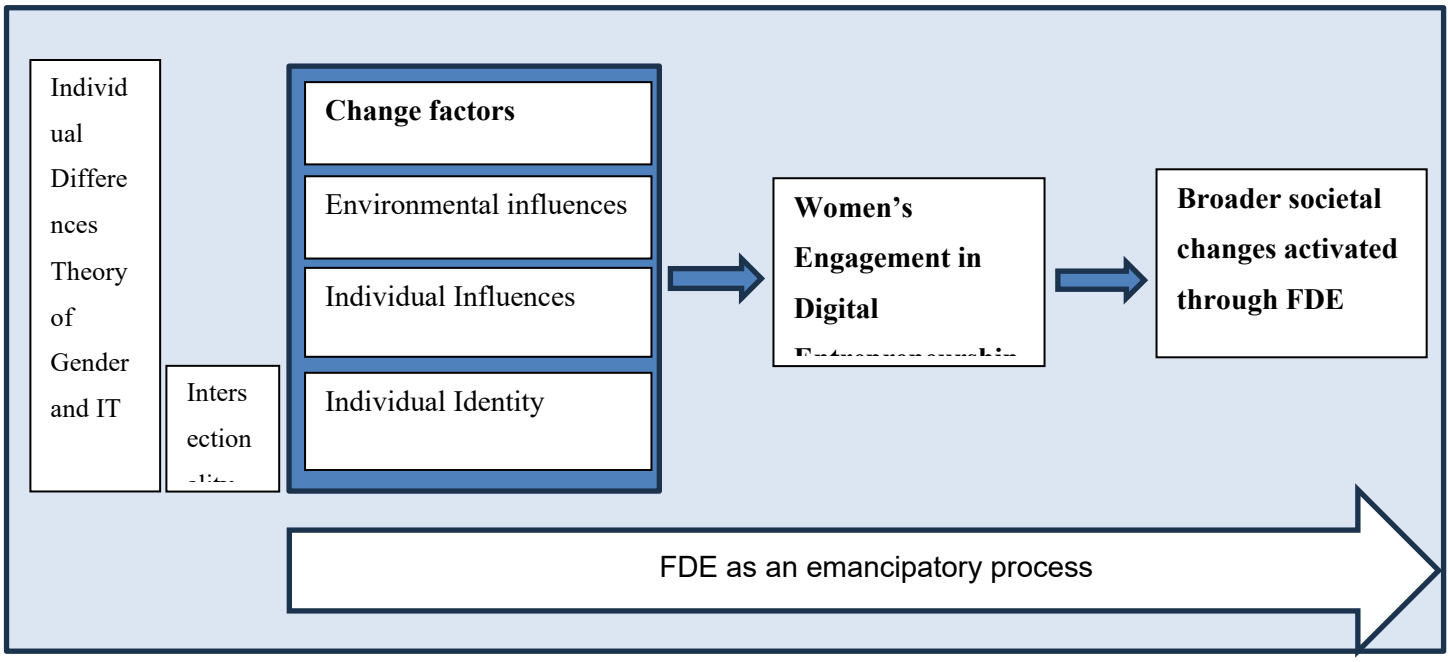

Figure 2.2 Flow of the Study

2.5.2 Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice (RCTP)

The Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice (RCTP), formulated by Eagly and Karau (2002), offers a comprehensive and nuanced examination of the development of prejudice against women. In doing so, the RCTP provides a robust framework for understanding the intricate mechanisms underlying the evolution of bias against women. According to the RCTP, prejudice arises when people perceive incongruence in terms of the expected characteristics of a particular social group and the prerequisites of the social roles that individual group members aspire to engage in (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Rudman and Phelan, 2008; Balachandra *et al.*, 2019). Explaining the marginalisation of women in leadership positions, the RCTP exemplifies that prejudice towards women results from the incongruity between stereotypical beliefs people have about women and stereotypical characterisation of leadership roles. For instance, based on social perceptions, it has been widely accepted that women tend to exhibit more communal characteristics, while effective leadership requires more agentic attributes, resulting in role incongruity and prejudice against women (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Heilman and Caleo, 2018). As society's perceptions about how

women should behave heavily depend on stereotypical beliefs about gender, the RCTP provides a more in-depth review of gender stereotypes. Gender roles are derived based on socially shared expectations and assumptions about the attributes that should be held by men and women (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Rosette and Tost, 2010; Heilman, 2012). Based on the RCTP, gender stereotypes comprise descriptive and prescriptive elements that govern an individual's behaviours and roles (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Rudman and Phelan, 2008). Descriptive norms refer to the consensual beliefs regarding what group members actually do, and injunctive or prescriptive norms indicate shared expectations of ideal behaviours by the members who fall into a particular category (Rudman and Phelan, 2008; Balachandra *et al.*, 2019; Stewart *et al.*, 2021). As an example, descriptive norms resemble societal beliefs like "women are sensitive, fragile and mild", and prescriptive norms resemble beliefs like "men should not cry in public places" (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Prescriptive norms are more like rules one must follow when embracing a particular gender (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Despite efforts made at the individual and policy levels to eradicate these archaic and detrimental gender norms, these conventional norms persist in contemporary society (Stewart *et al.*, 2003).

The perceived incongruity between the two forms of stereotypes about female gender roles and leadership roles results in two forms of prejudice towards women (Rudman and Phelan, 2008). First, descriptive stereotypes influence society to perceive women as less suitable candidates for leadership positions than men (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Rudman and Phelan, 2008). For example, research findings reveal that when selecting and recruiting individuals for managerial positions, there are explicit biases against women candidates, as evaluators presume women do not have the attributes required for leadership positions (Heilman, 2012; Mastracci and Arreola, 2016; Heilman and Caleo, 2018). Literature further indicates that when selecting a successor to manage a family business, sons are often preferred over daughters, as society readily attributes essential qualities for business success to males (McAdam, Brophy and Harrison, 2021). Furthermore, when selecting a leader from an entrepreneurial team, the expectation for women to emerge as leaders is lower due to descriptive gender norms that undermine their competence and leadership potential (Yang and Aldrich, 2014). These findings suggest that descriptive norms contribute to a preconception that women are not competent enough to hold leadership positions.

While descriptive norms lower expectations of women's competence, prescriptive norms create negative perceptions about women who defy traditional gender expectations by showcasing strong leadership abilities. Even when women challenge these biases and assume leadership roles, there is a backlash effect (See Section 2. 7. 3). This, in turn, reinforces biases rather than breaking them (Rudman and Phelan, 2008; Heilman, 2012; Heilman and Caleo, 2018). Thus, the women who become effective leaders are compelled to bear the risk of society perceiving them as insufficient to be women. For example, successful women who deviate from prescriptive gender norms are frequently labelled in popular culture with derogatory terms such as "dragon lady," "ice queen," or "ball breaker," reflecting societal discomfort with their assertiveness and leadership (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Rudman and Phelan, 2008; Heilman, 2012; Balachandra *et al.*, 2019). Due to these two forms of prejudice, women may struggle to attain leadership positions, and even the few women who attain leadership roles may be negatively perceived by society as they deviate from conventional gender expectations.

Although both descriptive and prescriptive norms contribute to prejudice against women in male-dominated business sectors, prescriptive norms are more deeply entrenched and persist despite shifts in descriptive norms (Diekman and Eagly, 2000; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Rudman and Phelan, 2008). Their effects remain particularly harmful, reinforcing societal resistance to women in leadership and entrepreneurial roles. Researchers have noted that with the increasing presence of women in the corporate world, descriptive norms about gender are evolving to better reflect the realities of women in agentic positions; however, prescriptive beliefs tend to persist and are slow to change (Diekman and Eagly, 2000; Rudman and Phelan, 2008). Given that the prescriptive norms remain intact, the section below provides a broader understanding of how these norms elicit adverse reactions towards women.

2.5.3 Diversity, Intersectionality, and Marginalization

Marginalization, Second Form of Prejudice and Bias Backlash Effect

Women’s engagement in male-dominant sectors such as digital technologies and entrepreneurship often occurs within environments characterized by marginalization, which shows a systematic exclusion of specific groups from full participation, visibility, and resource access.

This marginalization manifests both structurally and culturally, as women frequently face disparities in accessing finance, technology, and networks, compounded by societal expectations that relegate them to supportive or secondary roles. The mechanisms of exclusion are not always overt; instead, they are often perpetuated through subtle, everyday practices that diminish the legitimacy and visibility of women in conventionally male-dominant sectors. The bias backlash effect offers a useful perspective for understanding the subtle and persistent marginalization experienced by women.

Unfavourable evaluations of women who challenge the stereotypes and become leaders in predominantly male-gendered roles have been substantiated by previous scholars (Glick and Fiske, 2001; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012; Heilman and Caleo, 2018). As elaborated above, the RCTP by Eagly and Karau (2002) highlights the prescriptive nature of gender norms and elaborates on the negative reactions towards female agency due to the prescriptive nature of gender stereotypes. Such social and economic retaliations directed towards an individual's counter-stereotypical behaviour are recognised as "backlash effects" (Rudman, 1998; Glick and Fiske, 2001; Rudman and Phelan, 2008; Heilman and Caleo, 2018). Although women must deviate from traditional female stereotypes to be perceived as competent leaders, they may still fail to impress society by doing so. This is because women leaders will not demonstrate the soft and communal attributes traditionally expected from a woman (Rudman and Phelan, 2008). Consequently, rather than positively perceiving women's success in male-gendered positions, such successful women may be regarded as a disgrace to womanhood (Heilman, 2012). For instance, extant literature substantiates that agentic women with attributes such as confidence, assertiveness, and competitiveness have been recognised as competent leaders but perceived as unlikable by individuals in the wider society (Rudman, 1998; Rudman and Phelan, 2008; Rosette and Tost, 2010; Heilman, 2012). For instance, impression management is widely recognised as a vital skill that significantly influences an individual's success in the business environment. This process often involves self-promotion, which clearly articulates one's achievements and strengths. While this approach is considered agentic, it is noteworthy that, in contrast to the acceptance often afforded to men who engage in self-promotion, women who utilise similar strategies frequently face substantial disapproval (Rudman, 1998; Rudman and Phelan, 2008; Heilman and Caleo, 2018). Therefore, when hiring employees, female candidates who demonstrate counter-stereotypical

behaviours and engage in self-promotion often fail to get selected for the respective positions (Rudman, 1998; Rudman and Phelan, 2008).

Overall, the extant literature on the bias backlash effect suggests that despite the increase in the number of women in the corporate sector, the perception that women should engage in more communal activities remains mostly unchanged. This can adversely affect women in business leadership roles (Rudman and Phelan, 2008). Descriptive stereotypes portray women as communal and nurturing, often leading to the perception that they lack the agency required to succeed as entrepreneurs (Ahl, 2004; Ahl and Marlow, 2012). Thus, if a woman wants to succeed in the entrepreneurial arena, she is expected to deviate from traditional communal attributes and adopt more masculine attributes (Balachandra *et al.,* 2019). Aligning with the phrase "Think Male, Think Entrepreneur" (Gupta *et al.,* 2009; Laguía *et al.,* 2019), women are expected to adopt masculine characteristics to navigate the challenging path to becoming effective entrepreneurs. As explained in the bias backlash effect (Rudman and Phelan, 2008), when female entrepreneurs deviate from the prescriptive gender norms about women, society will label them as strange and may find their behaviour less likeable. Thus, it can be expected that women may face challenges in becoming and succeeding as entrepreneurs due to social criticism in male-dominated fields. With the perceived inconsistency between the gender attributes assigned to women and the leadership attributes, not only society but also women themselves may believe that they do not fit into the leadership role and anticipate lesser performance and more chances of failure (Heilman et al., 1989; Heilman, 2012; Ladge, Eddleston, and Sugiyama, 2019). Despite significant socio-economic changes that have taken place over the decades, the business world still reinforces the widely accepted gender norms (Acker, 1990; Manzi, Caleo and Heilman, 2024). As a result, women in business leadership and entrepreneurial roles are explicitly or implicitly devalued and considered as deficient (Harrison, Leitch, and McAdam, 2015).

Diversity among Females and Intersectionality

Feminist struggles take different forms in diverse social, political, and cultural settings. These diversities, in turn, challenge universalised notions of women's oppression and advocate for

localised and nuanced approaches to gender equality (Mohanty, 2002; Hewamanne, 2020). From the lens of conventional feminism, for example, white, cisgender, heterosexual women are at the centre of concern, where research efforts mainly focus on the experience of such women (Johnson and Otto, 2019). While white, cisgender, heterosexual women become the norm for females, other females who do not belong to this norm are deprived of academic and policy-level attention (Zavella, 2014; Paechter, 2018; Johnson and Otto, 2019; Page, Cerezo and Ross, 2022). Thus, to unearth its complexity, the marginalisation of women needs to be understood as the outcome of interconnected and mutually shaping forces rather than as the outcome of a single force.

To gain a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of marginalisation experienced by women, researchers have been increasingly using the theoretical lens of intersectionality. Intersectionality was initially established as a concept that explains the experiences of black women in the American context, where they face synergised effects of exclusion and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). While the subordination of women based on the social ascription of gender is a universal phenomenon, intersectionality highlights that the subordination experienced by women is further shaped by various intersecting social ascriptions, such as race, ethnicity, age, class, and sexual orientation (Zavella, 2014; Marlow, 2020). Thus, researchers have emphasised that gender equality studies should go beyond the white, heterosexual, cisgender woman and explore the experiences of other women whose problems have received limited academic attention (Praag, 1999; Johnson and Otto, 2019; Cheryan and Markus, 2020; Eagly, Nater and Miller, 2020; Marlow, 2020; Page, Cerezo and Ross, 2022). Therefore, it is imperative to explore how sources of diversity, such as colour, sexual preference, physical abilities, and socially constructed identities, influence the creation of profound distinctions among women.

2.5.4 Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT (IDTGI)

Harnessing FDE's full potential requires an in-depth, holistic understanding of the phenomenon and an appreciation for the intertwined nature of technology with individual and societal factors. The extant literature on digital entrepreneurship (Paul *et al.*, 2023) and female entrepreneurship (Cardella, Hernández-Sánchez and Sánchez-García, 2020) emphasise that most

studies lack sound theoretical underpinnings. Thus, when exploring FDE, as an intersection of digital entrepreneurship and female entrepreneurship, researchers must rely on underpinning theories to ensure the studies are grounded in established knowledge (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). Researchers consider theoretical perspectives crucial for exploring women's involvement in the IT sector. They have further emphasised that studies examining the factors that reinforce or restrain women's engagement in IT sector careers are limited, and also lack a robust theoretical foundation (Trauth *et al.*, 2004; Trauth and Quesenberry, 2006; Ridley and Young, 2012; Trauth, 2013). To enhance the present study's robustness, the researcher uses the Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT (IDTGIT) (Trauth and Quesenberry, 2006; Trauth and Connolly, 2021) as the theoretical framework. IDTGIT is considered a sound theoretical perspective as it enables a more holistic understanding of drivers that reinforce or restrain women's engagement in IT careers by considering differences within women as individuals and broader environmental factors.

Women represent a diverse community whose experiences are shaped by the intersectionality of various social ascriptions, such as race, class, and ethnicity, which extend beyond gender (Dean *et al.*, 2019; Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020). Therefore, conventional theoretical perspectives that portray women as homogeneous and universalised will not accurately represent women's digital entrepreneurial experiences (Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Since women represent a diverse community, it is essential to explore how different factors determine individual behavioural differences related to IT sector participation in an integrative manner. Responding to the need to examine women's experience in IT careers from an intersectionality aspect, Trauth *et al.* (2004) developed the Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT, which explores personal and social constructs that influence and shape women's involvement in IT. Focusing on individual differences in gender and information technology, the theory posits that personal attributes and the environmental context are critical factors that influence women's participation in digital settings. Therefore, thoroughly exploring these elements is essential to attain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon (Trauth *et al.*, 2004; Trauth and Quesenberry, 2006). The theory, which is based on the IT sector female workforce, recognises three constructs: environmental factors, individual identity factors, and individual influence factors on women's participation in the digital workforce (Trauth *et al.*, 2004; Trauth and Quesenberry, 2006; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Further refining

the IDTGIT, Trauth and Connolly (2021) highlighted that going beyond the observed associations between factors and women's participation in IT, it is imperative to provide a theoretical explanation of how and why these factors operate. Thus, the refined IDTGIT gives the basis for many interesting and insightful explanations about what reinforces women's engagement in FDE despite the double-gender barrier they experience. Table 2.6, extracted from Trauth *et al.* (2004), explains the aspects that come under each construct that shape the diverse behaviour of women.

Table 2.6 Constructs of Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT

Construct	**Sub Construct**	**Example**
Environmental Influences	Economic influences	Cost of living, unemployment
	Cultural influences	Attitudes about women
	Societal infrastructure influences	Availability of childcare
	Policy influences	Laws about gender discrimination
Individual Identity	Personal demographics	Age, ethnicity, socio-economic status (SES), marital status, geography, educational background
	Type of IT work	Software development, IS design
Individual Influences	Personal influences	Significant people (parents, counsellors, mentors, role models), Significant life experiences
	Personal Characteristics	Personality traits, abilities

Source: (Trauth et al., 2004)

The IDTGIT provides a viable theoretical underpinning for exploring FDE's emancipatory potential. Despite the challenges women face in a double-gender bind, women are increasingly engaging in digital entrepreneurship. It is especially noteworthy that this tendency is more augmented in contextual settings which have less developed technological infrastructure and more unfavourable environments for women (Javadian and Singh, 2012; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019, 2020); thus, it would be appropriate to determine what drives women to adopt

digital entrepreneurship opportunities. Especially, as Atarah and Nolan (2023) highlighted, an individual's emancipation starts from realising that she is excluded or oppressed, and working towards breaking free from the constraints that limit her. Therefore, exploring factors that encourage women to liberate themselves from the constraints they experience and pursue FDE is imperative. IDTGIT provides a theoretical base for researchers to examine how individual and environmental factors shape women's engagement in FDE to overcome barriers by leveraging digital platforms to initiate positive change in the social order.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter focused on reviewing the extant literature on FDE, which helped to identify the gaps in the extant literature and theoretical perspectives related to the area of FDE. These gaps include conducting more studies on FDE as it is a novel area which has received limited academic attention thus far; the need to explore the emancipatory potential of FDE as findings of current studies are inconclusive and far from providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon; the need to take context into consideration when exploring the emancipatory potential of FDE as the context shapes an individual's liberation; the need to explore the impact of intersectionality towards emancipatory potential of FDE; paucity of studies about FDE in developing countries and lack of methodological diversity in FDE studies. The review underscores the importance of conducting studies exploring the emancipatory potential of FDE in diverse contexts, giving attention to the intersectional differences. Bridging these gaps in the extant literature, the present study aims to attain a comprehensive understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE in the Sri Lankan context, giving attention to the intersectional differences. Furthermore, after reviewing the extant literature, theories that offer valuable insights were identified, including IDTGIT, intersectionality, and Role Congruity of the Prejudice, which provided a robust foundation for exploring FDE. This review of the existing literature has highlighted important theoretical and empirical insights and enabled the identification of gaps and emerging trends that will inform the current study. Hence, this chapter laid a strong foundation for the present study by synthesising various perspectives, ensuring that the research is grounded in a well-informed scholarly context.

Chapter Three

Proposed Framework and Hypotheses

Chapter 3: Proposed Framework and Hypotheses

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the conceptual framework developed based on the theoretical foundation attained through the literature review and outlines the hypotheses that guide this study. The structure of the chapter is visually depicted in Figure 3.1. The study primarily focuses on attaining a comprehensive understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE, where efforts are driven to investigate the factors that drive women to engage in digital entrepreneurship despite the barriers and how their engagement in FDE activates a positive social change. The proposed framework is related to exploring factors affecting women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship. A conceptual framework captures key relationships among the variables and provides a structured approach to examining the research problem. The chapter begins by providing a theoretical background to the study, and then the proposed research framework developed based on IDTGIT is illustrated. Thereafter, key variables of the study are explained, outlining the definitions. Then, the hypothesis and the justifications based on relevant literature are presented. The chapter concludes with a summary.

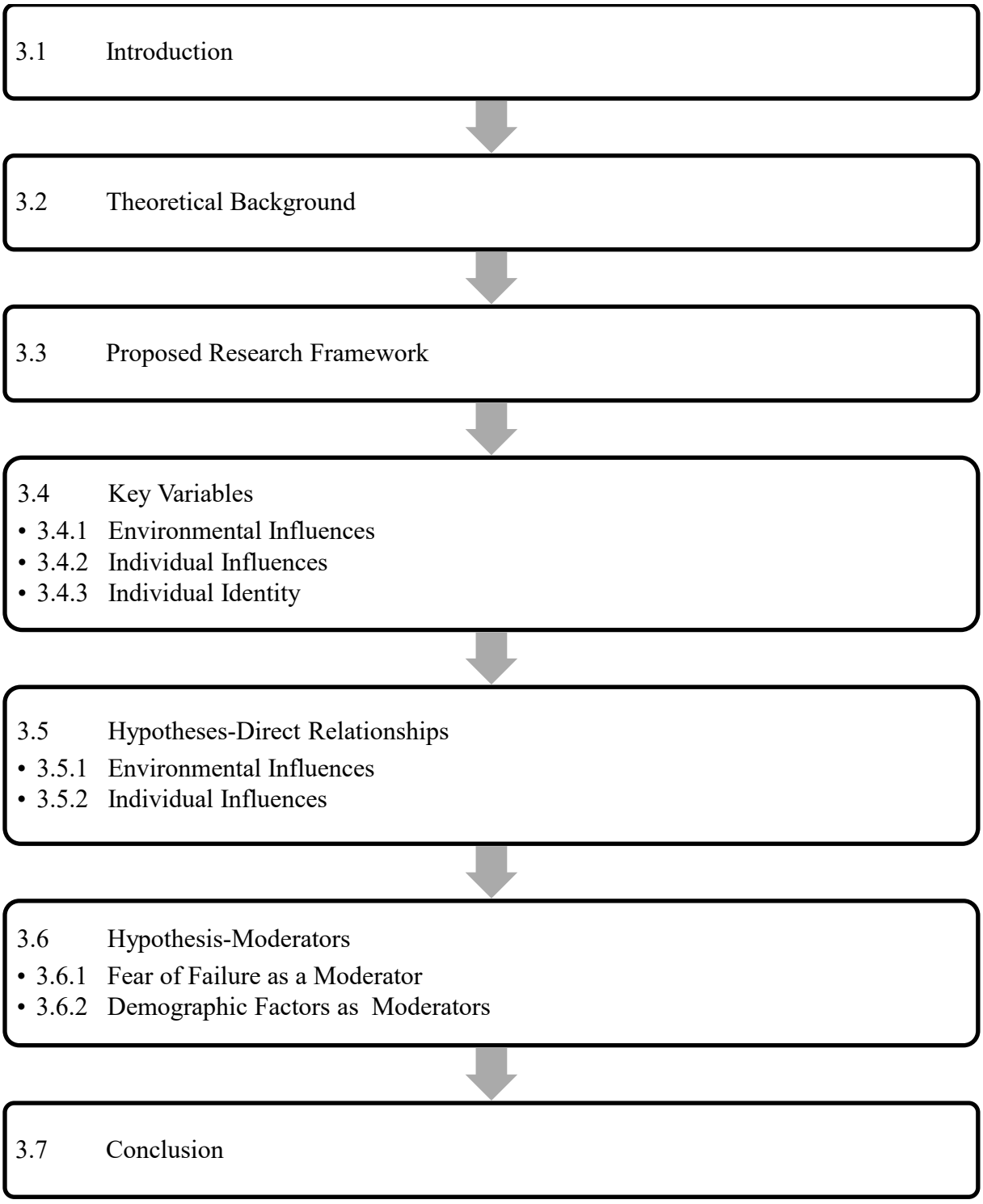

Figure 3.1 Chapter Structure

3.2 Theoretical Background

As elaborated in the Literature Review chapter, the focus of this study is to attain a holistic understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE. When exploring the phenomenon, the researcher aligns with the predominant position of perceiving emancipation as a process executed by human actors who are capable of dealing with contextual conditions (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018; Roy, Mohapatra and Banerjee, 2022). Based on Rindova, Barry and Ketchen (2009), when exploring entrepreneurship as emancipation, it is imperative to perceive emancipation as breaking free from the constraints that presently limit them and bringing about a favourable change in social order through their engagement in FDE. Thus, aligning with extant literature to comprehensively understand FDE as an emancipatory pathway, the study predominantly focused on two aspects. The first aspect refers to what drives an individual to pursue a digital entrepreneurial venture, and the second is focused on how such entrepreneurial efforts activate social change.

The first two research objectives: to explore the factors driving Sri Lankan women to engage in FDE and to attain an in-depth understanding of how intra-gender differences resulting from the intersection of gender with other social ascriptions, such as race, ethnicity, and social class, influence women's participation in FDE evolve around the aspect of exploring the drivers that influence women to break free from the extant constraints and engage in FDE. To attain these two research objectives, the researcher explored the causal relationship between a wide array of environmental and individual factors influencing women's intention to engage in FDE. To attain the third research objective of obtaining a more in-depth understanding of the transformative changes activated through FDE, the researcher used only the qualitative approach as it aligns with the nature of the research question and ensures the parsimony of the study.

To explore the causal relationship between predictors and women's intention to engage in FDE, it is imperative to explore what encompasses engagement in FDE. Based on Shane and Venkataraman (2000), entrepreneurship covers the broader spectrum of individuals discovering entrepreneurial opportunities, evaluating them, and exploiting those opportunities by building a business that can operate to generate returns. Thus, engagement in entrepreneurship covers the entrepreneur's involvement in one or all aspects of the process, including recognition of

opportunities, evaluation of those and exploitation of an opportunity (Uriarte, Espinoza-Benavides and Ribeiro-Soriano, 2023). Aligning with this extant literature, this study covers women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship as a process where women (individually or jointly) initiate and run a digital business to generate returns despite the gendered constraints they experience. As intention is perceived as the best predictor of one's behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Kruger et al., 2000), as in many of the previous studies that explored entrepreneurial behaviour, in this study also, intention to engage in FDE was taken as the construct that reflects women's engagement in FDE.

The study particularly focusses on intention to engage in FDE rather than female digital entrepreneurial satisfaction, as engagement captures the dynamic and interactive nature of FDE more broadly and in an effective manner. Entrepreneurial engagement reflects the individual's active involvement and psychological investment in entrepreneurial tasks, which reflects the joint function of individual as well as contextual factors (Uriarte et al., 2023). Based on the extant literature by exploring the intention to engage in FDE, the study highlights the imperativeness of exploring not only the individual's choice based on how she feels but also the conditions that facilitate striving towards goals (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Therefore, focusing on intention to engagement in FDE aligns with the overall study purpose of attaining a comprehensive understanding of the emancipatory potential which requires paving greater attention to the contextual conditions. However, unlike the previous studies that explored the entrepreneurial intention by using the samples of undergraduates and postgraduate students as the primary respondents in this study, the researcher relied on the experiences of actual female digital entrepreneurs who started digital businesses (Shukla *et al.*, 2021; Emmanuel *et al.*, 2022; Chakraborty and Biswal, 2023). Exploring the experiences of actual entrepreneurs will enable to attain a more realistic understanding of the FDE in the Sri Lankan context. As Liu *et al.* (2011) emphasised, every individual with entrepreneurial intentions may not be a real entrepreneur due to the influence of personal characteristics and environmental conditions. Furthermore, in a context like Sri Lanka, where society perceives entrepreneurship as an option for individuals who cannot excel in education (Rosa *et al.,* 2006), exploring entrepreneurial intention using an undergraduate sample may not reflect the real-life situation. Utilising a sample of female digital entrepreneurs already in the business in the study paved the way for a more realistic understanding

of what environmental and personal factors drive women to break free from gendered constraints and engage in FDE.

The limited amount of studies conducted on the emancipatory potential of FDE predominantly focused on how women utilise digital affordances to overcome the gendered barriers they experience, and do not focus on the vast array of factors that influence women to disrupt the status quo and engage in FDE despite the double-gender bind they experience as society perceives both entrepreneurship and digital technologies as male domains (Adikaram & Razik, 2023). Therefore, it was evident that extant literature is lagging behind in providing a holistic understanding of the factors that drive women to engage in FDE, which plays a critical role when exploring the emancipatory potential of FDE. The FDE involves an uphill battle for women, which requires deviating from the normative gender expectations and embracing new roles which are being recognised as misfit for them. However, despite the complexities evolving around the synchronous recognition of entrepreneurship and the field of digital technologies as male domains, women have recently marked their presence in the digital entrepreneurship arena throughout the world, including Middle Eastern countries, which are deemed to have unfavourable conditions to women taking up economic activities (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020). This reiterates the significance of exploring what drives women's presence in the digital entrepreneurial arena. While there were no previous studies that focus on a wide array of factors that drive women to engage in digital entrepreneurship, Trauth & Connolly (2021) also emphasised the need for exploring the change factors which influence attaining gender equity in the IT industry in unique contextual conditions which have received limited academic attention thus far.

Based on the extant literature, the studies on FDE or women's engagement in any other IT careers were criticised as under-theorised (Trauth and Quesenberry, 2006; Ridley and Young, 2012; Suseno and Abbott, 2021; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). While there were a handful of theories explaining the under-representation of women in the IT sector (Ridley and Young, 2012), the theory that was harnessed to attain a more holistic understanding of the broad array of factors that drive a woman to engage in FDE was Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT (IDTGIT). As explained in the Literature Review chapter, according to IDIGIT, change factors that facilitate

women's navigation in digital spaces were mainly divided into three aspects, namely environmental influences, individual identity factors and individual influences (Trauth *et al.*, 2004; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Adding on the intersectionality perspective also substantiates the imperativeness of exploring how other social ascriptions, such as geographic location, marital status, etc., influence women's engagement in FDE. Therefore, based on the underpinning theories, the antecedents examined in this study include environmental factors, namely, economic instability, attitude towards women, perceived formal institutional support; individual influences, namely role models, family support, previous work experiences, digital self-efficacy, internal motives, fear of failure; and individual identity factors namely socio-economic status (SES), marital status, geography and educational background. Through the empirical study, the researcher first tried to explore the impact of these predictors towards women's intention to engage in FDE by testing the hypotheses, and then she tried to explore further how and why these factors drive FDE through a qualitative study. The qualitative study focused on diving deeper into the factors influencing FDE and exploring the social change activated through FDE. Ultimately, it is evident that exploring the factors that drive women to engage in FDE by breaking free from the extant constraints which limit them and exploring how FDE paves the way for the transformation of social order enabled the attainment of a more comprehensive understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE.

3.3 Proposed Research Framework

Based on the insights received from the IDTGIT and Intersectionality perspectives, an array of factors were identified as influencing women's intention to engage in FDE, and relationships between variables were proposed. The proposed conceptual framework developed in light of these relationships is outlined below in Figure 3.2.

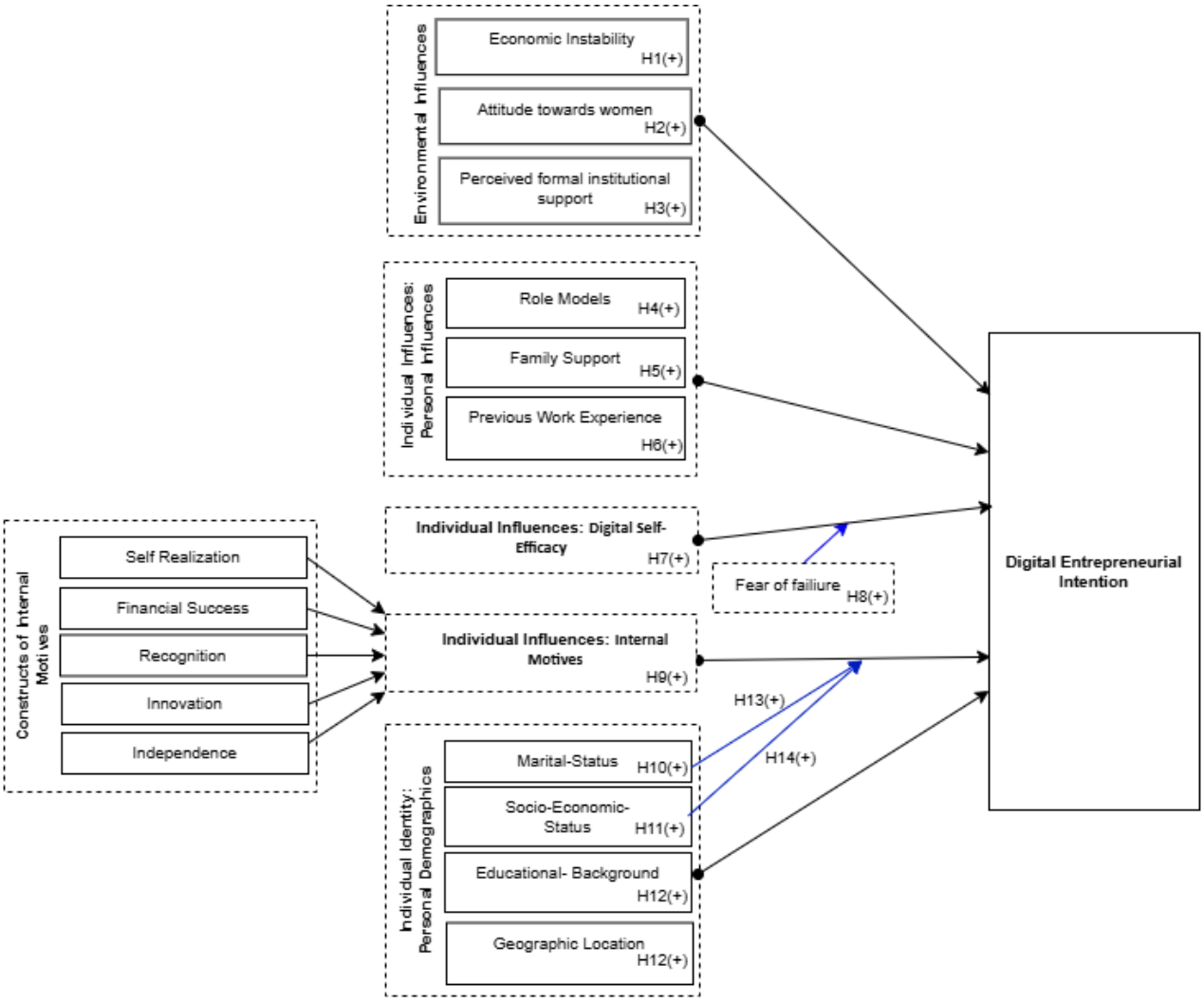

Figure 3.2 Conceptual Framework

3.4 Key Variables

This section outlines all the independent, dependent, and moderator variables in the study. For all the variables, clear definitions are given, and what is covered by each variable is clearly explained. This mitigates the risk of misinterpreting the variables and going beyond the scope of what is being covered by each variable.

3.4.1 Environmental Influences

Entrepreneurial ventures and the broader environment being deeply entwined, it is apparent that changes in the broader environment tend to influence entrepreneurial businesses (Boyd and Vozikis, 1994; Panda, 2018). In light of the IDTGIT (Trauth and Connolly, 2021), external environmental factors such as cultural attitudes and values, economic and policy, history and population characteristics influence women's involvement in the IT workforce and bring gender parity to the IT sector (Trauth and Quesenberry, 2006). Substantiating the immense role played by the offline environment on FDE, previous authors emphasised how women's lives on digital platforms juxtapose the inequalities they experience in the offline environment (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017a; Dy, Martin and Marlow, 2018). For this study, the researcher explored the impact of three environmental factors: economic instability, attitudes towards women, and formal institutional support.

3.4.1.1 Economic Instability

Unstable economic conditions are nothing new to developing South Asian economies (Panda, 2018). Economic instability can be conceptualised as a peculiar state that hinders development potential, disrupts pricing dynamics and creates cyclical economic fluctuations (Cossiga, 2017). While economic instability fueled by political impasses has long existed in the Sri Lankan context, the country experienced the worst-ever economic crisis during the 2020s (World Bank, 2023; Liang, 2022). Despite the speculations that the economy would thrive after the end of the civil war that has taken place over three decades, such double-digit growth was far from attained owing to political instability, economic mismanagement, and poor policy initiatives. The country's economy has long been in an unstable state, characterised by slow growth, a weakened fiscal position, a high debt burden, dwindling investor confidence, and an unattractive environment for foreign direct investment (FDI) (Gunatilaka and Chandrasiri, 2022). As with all around the world, Sri Lanka also experienced the adverse economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, the vulnerable economic state which already prevailed in the country due to the easter attacks in 2019 and the dismissal of the incumbent government by the president intensified the worrisome conditions prevailing in the economy (Vision of Humanity, 2022).

Pandemic-induced economic distress combined with the extant economic conditions contributed to the generation of the worst ever economic conditions the country has ever experienced where for a period of few months, Sri Lankan citizens have to experience a shortage of essential items such as fuel, cooking gas, food and medicine as a country haven't had enough foreign currency to buy those. Making the survival of individuals and businesses more disrupting the fuel crisis in the country has resulted in extended power cuts (UN Women, 2022; Vision of Humanity, 2022).

Based on the extant literature, the impact of economic instability on female entrepreneurship is multifaceted. It was recognised that the adverse implications of economic downturns are much more severe for vulnerable segments of society (Linz and Semykina, 2010; Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2015). Both women and self-employed people are independently recognised as vulnerable segments in society. Therefore, women entrepreneurs face exacerbated marginalisation as their gender intersects with occupation (UN Women, 2022). Financial institutions were hesitant to lend to women-owned businesses during the crisis, viewing them as vulnerable initiatives. (Malach, Lerner and Schwartz, 2010). Furthermore, based on the studies related to the Covid-19 pandemic-induced economic unrest globally, it was identified that female entrepreneurial ventures experienced more debilitating effects than male entrepreneurial ventures, mainly owing to the increased double burden of paid and unpaid responsibilities (Madgavkar *et al.*, 2020; Elam *et al.*, 2021; Rasul *et al.*, 2021; UN Women, 2022). Conversely, some literature has favoured that economic adversities, which result in the loss of employment, economic inadequacies and pressure deriving from hyperinflation, work as 'push motivational factors' which drive women to engage in entrepreneurial businesses (Malach, Lerner and Schwartz, 2010; Jennings and Brush, 2013; Özsungur, 2019). Thus, it is imperative to explore how the economic instability prevailing in the country impacts FDE in the Sri Lankan context.

3.4.1.2 Attitude towards Women

Based on IDTGIT, cultural influence is recognised as a key factor affecting female participation in the IT workforce, which is recognised as a male domain (Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Gender is a socially constructed phenomenon, and sociocultural influence plays a predominant role in the demarcation of roles and power between different genders (Hewamanne,

2020). Widely held attitudes towards women in a given context reflect the cultural influence on women's occupational choices such as female digital entrepreneurial engagement. People's beliefs related to responsibilities, roles, recognition and behaviour that women are expected to embody pave the way for societal attitudes towards women (Spence and Hahn, 1997). The exploration of gender equality in the digital entrepreneurship domain cannot be isolated from the sociocultural influence because, as Mishra (2013) emphasised, feminism itself is a culture-based phenomenon. Women are part and partial of the broader society, and their behaviour and choices are influenced by the widely held attitude towards women in that particular context (Donnelly *et al.*, 2016; Zobel, 2024).

Although the prejudices and unfavourable attitudes towards females are common occurrences in different sociocultural contexts, what women are experiencing in different contexts differs vastly from one to another (Mishra, 2013; Jones *et al.*, 2025). Women in third world countries do not share the same identity and cultural influences as women in Western developed contexts, nor the experience of women in developing third world countries cannot be emulated with the experience of Middle Eastern women who are rich in resources but with extreme discriminatory practices (Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025). Attitudes towards women in developing Asian countries are shaped by the deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms and unfavourable power structures fueled by post-colonialism, which Mohanty calls the "double colonisation" (Mohanty, 2002). When considering the unique contextual condition in Sri Lanka, on the one hand, the double colonisation creates adversity towards women; on the other hand, the influential role of Buddhism, which is a religion that promotes equality, tends to create a favourable attitude towards Sri Lankan women than other South Asian neighbours. Thus, when exploring the experiences of female digital entrepreneurs in the Sri Lankan context, it is imperative to investigate how societal attitudes about women shape their career choices. Furthermore, addressing gender equality from a broader perspective requires a closer eye on shifting attitudes and beliefs towards women in the contemporary context (Stewart *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, when exploring digital entrepreneurship as a liberating pathway for women, it is essential to examine the underlying attitudes towards women and how these attitudes have evolved over time. Additionally, it is important to understand how these prevailing attitudes contribute to the ongoing

gender-based disparities that limit women's access to resources, positions of power, and opportunities.

3.4.1.3 Formal Institutional Support

While strong institutional support tends to impact entrepreneurial ventures positively, institutional voids undermine entrepreneurial businesses (Webb, Khoury and Hitt, 2020). Formal institutional support can be defined as the structured assistance provided by the political, judicial, and economic guidelines intended to regulate personal conduct and promote transactions (North, 1990). Emphasising the predominant role played by formal institutions towards entrepreneurial ventures, researchers substantiate that stabilised legal framework and state sector support have a significant impact towards enhancing the confidence and the willingness of individuals to engage in entrepreneurship (Lim et al., 2010; Yousafzai, Saeed and Muffatto, 2015). In the context of female entrepreneurship in developing economies, it has been widely accepted that legislations and policies favouring gender parity in the workplace, public financing, training opportunities and consultancy are pivotal to enhancing women's entrepreneurial intention (Vossenberg, 2013; Langevang, Hansen and Rutashobya, 2018; Panda, 2018; Soluk, Kammerlander and Darwin, 2021). While emphasising the central role that formal institutional support plays towards uplifting entrepreneurship, a significant amount of studies explore the adverse implications of institutional voids towards entrepreneurial ventures (Langevang, Hansen and Rutashobya, 2018; Webb, Khoury and Hitt, 2020). Strong formal institutional support is one of the major ingredients of creating an equitable society, as it can significantly reduce inequalities within the broader community. Thus, to enhance women's willingness to engage in entrepreneurship and to bring gender parity in the entrepreneurial arena, it is significant to have formal institutional support to a greater extent (Kazumi and Kawai, 2017).

From the perspective of female entrepreneurship, formal institutional support initiatives ranging from financial assistance, subsidies to counselling and the creation of opportunities for improving technical knowledge are recognised as key factors shaping FDE (Muñoz and Kibler, 2016; Kazumi & Kawai, 2017; Raghuvanshi, Agrawal and Ghosh, 2017). While formal institutional voids result in reiterating the gender norms and unequal distribution of power among

genders that discourage female entrepreneurial ventures, favourable formal institutional context is a reinforcing factor towards initiating and sustaining women's entrepreneurial ventures. Support received from the formal institution enables sharpening women's ability to cope with entrepreneurial uncertainties. As FDE is a novel field with many uncertainties in enhancing women's capacity to embrace the entrepreneurial journey, it is vital to have formal institutional support.

3.4.2 Individual Influences

The second broad construct of IDTGIT predominantly focuses on two subcategories, namely personal characteristics and personal influences, influencing women's engagement in the IT sector (Ridley and Young, 2012; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). While personal characteristics are inherent personality traits and abilities, personal influences are the significant people and life experiences that influence an individual's engagement in the IT sector (Quesenberry & Trauth, 2012; Trauth, 2013). When exploring the behaviour of female digital entrepreneurs, it is imperative to examine the impact of these individual influences as a subtle interaction between environmental and individual influences shapes their behaviour. For this study, the researcher focused on personal influences, namely family support, role models, previous work experience, and personal characteristics, such as internal motivation, digital self-efficacy, and fear of failure. The family embeddedness of entrepreneurship is substantiated in the previous literature, where entrepreneurship and family are recognised as connected and complementary (Aldrich and Cliff, 2003; Powell and Eddleston, 2013; Welsh *et al.,* 2018). Based on the Sri Lankan culture, girls are expected to live a more sheltered life, and their decisions about higher education, employment and marriage are all influenced by the family (Hewamanne, 2020). Thus, family support was deemed a critical factor that needs to be explored. The researcher identified the role played by role models as another crucial aspect that needs to be explored. The imperative role played by the role models and mentors in reinforcing women's engagement in male-dominant sectors was substantiated by much of the previous literature (Quesenberry and Trauth, 2012; Suseno and Abbott, 2021; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Adding on previous work experience was recognised as another factor that needs to be explored because literature has highlighted the central role played by employment experiences to enhance human capital, which is critical to the entrepreneurial process (Jayawarna,

Rouse and Kitching, 2013; Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017b). Based on the extant literature, it was emphasised that entrepreneurs are driven by inner motives to make them free from the conventional power structures and authorities and to attain independence, which are the fundamental pillars of emancipation (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Atarah and Nolan, 2023). Thus, exploring the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship requires an in-depth exploration of the motives that drive an individual to engage in digital entrepreneurship. Due to these reasons under the category of personal characteristics, the researcher deemed internal motives as a critical factor that needs to be studied in the given context. The relationship between self-efficacy and intention to engage in behaviours in different contexts is well established, and studies related to digital technology adoption in other contexts also used self-efficacy as a major predictor of digital technology adoption (Molina-López *et al.*, 2021; Ulfert-Blank & Schmidt, 2022; Chakraborty and Biswal, 2023). Thus, digital self-efficacy was considered a focal factor influencing FDE in the given context. Fear of failure was also recognised as a key factor that needs to be explored, as discussion about any form of entrepreneurship cannot expunge the fear of failure as it is an inhibiting factor that discourages entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Wennberg, Pathak and Autio, 2013). In the entrepreneurial field, the fear of failure is a central emotional response related to the decision to start or not to start a business (Tsai, Chang and Peng, 2016a).

3.4.2.1 Family Support

In most instances, entrepreneurial businesses rely heavily on families, where the support extended by the family members ranges from financial support, expertise, advice, and emotional support, which are crucial to the success of the entrepreneurship journey (Neneh, 2017; Welsh *et al.*, 2018; Neneh and Welsh, 2022). From the entrepreneurial perspective, women tend to be risk-averse, lack self-confidence, have less access to networking and face constraints in terms of finding financial resources, and they tend to rely more on families to overcome these constraints (Welsh *et al.*, 2018). Engaging in an entrepreneurial business can be an emotional rollercoaster, requiring dealing with risks, uncertainties, and challenges. Having a strong emotional support system is essential when engaging in this challenging endeavours (Soluk, Kammerlander and Darwin, 2021) and that's where family comes in. Specially normative expectations often compel women to live nested lives while prioritising the familial responsibilities (Hewamanne, 2020), which can

undermine women's confidence in their own abilities to run businesses. In such an environment, family can play a significant role in providing emotional support for entrepreneurial individuals, and the support received by them can make a world of difference in an individual's entrepreneurial journey (Welsh *et al.*, 2018; Neneh and Welsh, 2022). Thus, it is imperative to note that family members' roles are crucial in businesses started by women.

While family support is a key drive for women to engage in entrepreneurship, its role will be substantial in developing economies with weak formal institutional support (Welsh *et al.*, 2018). As female entrepreneurs in South Asian countries face unique challenges around balancing work and family life, dealing with strict patriarchal gender norms, resource constraints, state sector inefficiencies and political instabilities (Panda, 2018; Agrawal *et al.*, 2023) in such a context, family support is vital, both as a source of strength and a key enabler in navigating these challenges (Sandhu, Hussain and Matlay, 2012). For instance, due to inefficiencies in the state sector and resource constraints, formal support systems and infrastructure for child and elderly care are not on par with those in developed economies. As a result, working women are compelled to rely on family for caregiving responsibilities (Nayakaratne and Perera, 2024). Furthermore, sociocultural norms favouring collectivism and a family-oriented lifestyle will make them more family-bound and tend to expect family support towards the key decisions of their lives (Hewamanne, 2020). Adding on Neneh and Welsh (2022) emphasised family support plays an essential and decisive role in the success of female technology entrepreneurs. They specifically highlighted the central role of instrumental support at home towards female technology entrepreneurs in developing countries, as they carry a disproportionate burden of house chores and childcare responsibilities (Neneh and Welsh, 2022). Thus, family support is a critical factor, especially when it comes to South Asian women's engagement in areas like digital entrepreneurship, which is recognised as a male-dominated field.

3.4.2.2 Role Models

An individual's decision to pursue a career in the entrepreneurial arena is influenced by their prior exposure to entrepreneurial role models to whom they can relate (Birley and Westhead, 1994; Nowiński and Haddoud, 2019; Wannamakok and Chang, 2020). From the perspective of

this study, a role model implies an inspirational female entrepreneur who initiated a business venture whose approach, specific attributes and behaviours are worth emulating. Schmutzler, Andonova and Diaz-Serrano (2019) emphasised that the experiences of entrepreneurial role models could instil more confidence in others to initiate businesses. When a person attempts to take on a new role that ventures into unfamiliar territory, they often look to others who have successfully navigated that path before (Treanor, 2022). This can help boost their confidence as they take on the unknown pathway. Substantiating the significant role of role models in novel and challenging career domains, Lent *et al.* (2002) indicate that role models play a predominant role in facilitating individuals' inner drives and inspirations towards a particular career path.

Entrepreneurial role models can be recognised as one of the most effective stimuli that drive women's entrepreneurial intentions. Observing or listening to the experiences of women entrepreneurs who have successfully navigated challenges related to stereotypical gender norms and institutional voids can inspire women to consider entrepreneurship as a viable pathway. With the expansion of digital technologies, women have expanded access to role models and mentors through digital platforms (Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023). While conventional female entrepreneurs' access to role models was limited by their geographical boundaries, incremental changes in access to role models have evolved as women have become more active on digital platforms. Thus, it would be imperative to explore how role models in the Sri Lankan context stimulate women's participation in FDE.

3.4.2.3 Previous Work Experience

The prior experience an individual gains related to a particular activity provides a more comprehensive understanding of how to perform that activity effectively. Bandura (1978) emphasised the critical role played by the "mastery experience" towards enhancing an individual's level of confidence towards effectively performing a certain activity. Mastery experience, which evolves around the opportunities given to an individual to engage in "learning by doing," will have a pivotal impact on their future behaviours, as such hands-on learning prepares them mentally to pursue the particular activity (Cox, Mueller, and Moss, 2002). Extant literature has emphasised the pivotal role of employment experiences in fostering human capital, which is critical for business

start-ups (Jayawarna, Rouse and Kitching, 2013; Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017b). Specifically, prior knowledge and the experience attained by an individual related to a particular market or industry will enable an individual to integrate the reflections from such experience to develop new solutions and bridge a gap that has not been satisfied thus far (Alvarez and Barney, 2007).

Highlighting the significant role played by prior work experience in the success of entrepreneurial businesses, Othman *et al.* (2016) emphasised that previous work experience facilitates the development and maturation of entrepreneurs, grooming them to deal with uncertainties effectively. Even though the formal education system plays a predominant role in nurturing entrepreneurial individuals (Ranasinghe, 2008; Sachitra and Chinthaka, 2022), prior work experience provides a wide array of resources and skills that are distinct from those acquired in conventional education (Davidson and Vaast, 2010). In examining female entrepreneurship, significant gaps in experience and education are recognised as major barriers that hinder the progress of female entrepreneurs (Watson, 2003; Dy and Agwunobi, 2019). Thus, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that drive women to engage in FDE, it is imperative to explore the role of previous work experience in promoting FDE.

3.4.2.4 Internal Motivation

Women's internal motivations are recognised as one of the predominant aspects of personal characteristics influencing the transformation of women's engagement in the IT sector (Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Internal motives refer to the inner psychological drives within an individual that direct her towards running a digital entrepreneurial venture. In the entrepreneurial literature, motivational factors have been heavily discussed in light of the "push vs pull" theory (Kirkwood, 2009; Özsungur, 2019). On one hand, pull factors reflect factors that showcase entrepreneurship as an attractive aspect through inner psychological drives; on the other hand, push factors are often characterised by external challenges (Kirkwood, 2009; Kirkwood and Walton, 2010). Internal motives are primarily aligned with the pull factors (Carsrud and Brännback, 2011; Özsungur, 2019) as these factors create desire and attraction towards entrepreneurship by perceiving it as a pathway to attain desired outcomes.

A deep dive into the extant literature substantiates that motivations for entrepreneurship are complex and intertwined (Mallon and Cohen, 2001; Kirkwood and Campbell-Hunt, 2007; Ismail, Shamsudin and Chowdhury, 2011). Kirkwood (2009) emphasises that a single motivational factor does not drive entrepreneurial intention. Rather, multiple motives fuel the entrepreneurial journey. As these motivational factors are not mutually exclusive, internal motivation is often referred to as a compound factor comprising five sub-dimensions: desire for self-realisation, financial success, innovation, recognition, and independence. While literature substantiates an array of pull factors (Ismail, Shamsudin and Chowdhury, 2011; Anggadwita and Dhewanto, 2015; Özsungur, 2019), six commonly used pull factors have been utilised in this study. These motivational factors are the desire for self-realisation, the desire for financial success, the desire for innovation, the desire for recognition, and the desire for independence (Carter *et al.*, 2003). A worthwhile point to note here is that the desire for financial success was taken as an internal motive, as it reflects the source of personal fulfilment or self-determination (Carver and Baird, 1998). As inner motives play a vital role in personal characteristics that determine an individual's desire and commitment to engage in particular behaviours, exploring the internal motives that directly influence entrepreneurial engagement is imperative.

3.4.2.5 Digital Self Efficacy

Based on the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), Bandura (1978) emphasised that perceived self-efficacy is one of the foremost determinants of individual behaviour. The relationship between self-efficacy and intention to engage in behaviours in different contexts is well established. Studies on digital technology adoption in different contexts also used self-efficacy as a major predictor of adoption (Compeau and Higgins, 1995; Bui and Duong, 2024). According to the social cognitive theory, to gain a more realistic understanding of self-efficacy, it should be measured in relation to a particular domain or task (Bandura, 2006; Wang *et al.*, 2020; Ulfert-Blank and Schmidt, 2022). Thus, self-efficacy related to digital technologies is recognised with different terms such as "internet self-efficacy", "computer-self efficacy", "ICT self-efficacy", and "digital self-efficacy" where the core conception mainly evolves around an individual's judgement about his/her own capabilities in terms of using information and communication technology towards attaining a

particular task (Ulfert-Blank and Schmidt, 2022). With the increasing use of the internet and the embeddedness of technology in every aspect of human behaviour, digital self-efficacy should capture the whole involvement of the internet and its impact on human actions rather than just a focus on specific devices and computer applications (Ulfert-Blank & Schmidt, 2022). To attain a holistic picture of DSE, Ulfert-Blank and Schmidt (2022) define DSE as an individual's belief in their ability to use digital tools effectively, and it covers broader dimensions of information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety, and problem-solving.

3.4.2.5 Fear of Failure

In the same way, as there are inner psychological drives that motivate an individual to engage in entrepreneurial ventures, and there are also threatening forces that inhibit or suppress individual drive towards engaging in entrepreneurship (Ng and Jenkins, 2018). In the extant literature, fear of failure is identified as a crucial factor affecting an individual's efforts towards becoming an entrepreneur (Noguera, Alvarez and Urbano, 2013; Tsai, Chang and Peng, 2016b; Ng and Jenkins, 2018). Fear of failure reflects a negative emotion that involves experiences of shame or humiliation and emotional distress, which can enervate the confidence level of individuals to engage in entrepreneurial behaviour (Patzelt and Shepherd, 2011). Individual failure is associated with adverse consequences, and such awareness creates emotional discomfort and anxiety, which in turn pave the way for the perceived fear of failure (Tsai, Chang, and Peng, 2016a). Unlike the other variables identified in this study, the fear of failure was found to have a negative impact on one's level of confidence in engaging in entrepreneurial activities. Coping with the negative emotion of fear of failure is recognised as one of the most critical aspects towards initiating and sustaining an entrepreneurial venture effectively (Patzelt and Shepherd, 2011).

Entrepreneurship is characterised by a high level of uncertainty, which leads to elevated rates of business failure among entrepreneurial start-ups (Artinger and Powell, 2016). An individual's beliefs about the extent to which she can get involved in some behaviour will depend on the individual's fear of failure. Even though entrepreneurs are often recognised as high-risk takers, that does not mean they do not perceive fear of failure. As entrepreneurial businesses are

prone to high rates of failure and do not thrive in the long run, fear of failure is more prominent, even among those ambitious entrepreneurs (Ng and Jenkins, 2018). As a rational decision maker, an entrepreneurial individual assesses the threats associated with potential failures in their journey toward achieving the desired goals, which ultimately fosters the fear of failure (Noguera, Alvarez and Urbano, 2013). Substantiating the complex nature of the fear of failure, Jenkins, Wiklund, & Brundin (2014) emphasised that the fear of failure is a lot more than the adverse financial implications, where there are broader detrimental societal and psychological consequences associated with entrepreneurial failures. As women are more risk-averse than men (Bardasi, Sabarwal and Terrell, 2011; Boehe and Cruz, 2013), their fear of failure may be more pronounced when considering entrepreneurial opportunities. Based on the role congruity theory of prejudice, it has also been substantiated that women are more pessimistic towards expected outcomes derived from entrepreneurial outcomes (Eagly and Karau, 2002). When it comes to female entrepreneurship, fear of failure is recognised as a pivotal deterrent that hinders women's beliefs about their entrepreneurial success (Tsai, Chang and Peng, 2016b, 2016a). Thus, fear of failure is expected to have many adverse effects on female entrepreneurs. Furthermore, in situations where other external environmental volatilities exacerbate economic instabilities, the fear of failure among individuals becomes more apparent (Wennberg, Pathak and Autio, 2013). Based on Games *et al.* (2023) *crises are expected to cause high entrepreneurial fear of failure* (p. 229). Therefore, it can be speculated that a similar effect can take place in Sri Lanka, where individuals are more likely to experience an increased fear of failure as the country is facing its worst economic crisis, along with several other unfavourable environmental conditions. Thus, fear of failure towards engaging in digital entrepreneurship is presumed to be higher for women in Sri Lanka.

3.4.3 Individual Identity

Based on the IDTGIT, individual identity factors comprise personal demographics and type of IT work, which are recognised as pivotal drivers of change that influence women to engage in the IT sector (Trauth and Connolly, 2021). The type of IT work primarily related to IT sector employment was not considered a variable in the current study. The influence of personal demographic factors such as age, marital status, number of children, and geographic location on an individual's engagement in entrepreneurship was explored in many previous studies, with

inconclusive findings (Mandongwe and Jaravaza, 2020). As FDE is also a field of entrepreneurship, personal demographics related to women are recognised to impact female digital entrepreneurial intention. Exploring how other personal demographic factors influence women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship aligns with the call for conducting FDE studies from the theoretical perspective of intersectionality (Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017b; Dy, Martin and Marlow, 2018; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). As the literature review explains, intersectionality rejects the notion of gender as a binary and emphasises the importance of considering it as an intersection of gender with other social ascriptions such as age, marital status and socio-economic status (Crenshaw, 1991). As emphasised by the theoretical lens of intersectionality, acknowledging the heterogeneity within the category of women to gain an in-depth understanding of women's position in the society that governs their behaviour, it is imperative to explore how other social ascriptions, together with their gender, generate their unique experiences. Thus, in light of the IDTGIT and intersectionality perspectives, this study examines how women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship varies in relation to the influence of personal demographics, a subconstruct of individual identity.

Among the demographic factors influencing women's engagement in FDE, marital status, education, geographic location, and socio-economic status are considered in this study. In the South Asian context, marriage plays a predominant role in a woman's life where it is regarded as the ultimate culmination of womanhood (Mohanty, 2002; Perera, Ganeshan and Belitski, 2021; Mishra 2006, cited in Roy, Mohapatra and Banerjee, 2022). Thus, it is pivotal to explore the role of marital status towards their decision to pursue FDE. Education is considered another interesting variable that needs to be explored, as unlike many other South Asian neighbours, Sri Lanka has achieved considerable gender parity in education. For instance, based on the statistics in national universities, female students in STEM education outnumber male students (Adikaram and Razik, 2023), which provides positive rays of hope for women to thrive in educational fields identified as male dominated. Therefore, it is imperative to explore how women's educational attainments shape their digital entrepreneurial behaviour in the Sri Lankan context. Geographical location was also recognised as a critical factor affecting women's participation in FDE, as previous researchers have provided inconclusive findings about how geographic location shapes women's engagement

in digital platforms. At one end, the widely accepted notion favours digital platforms as a significant way for women to overcome the geographical barriers they experience (Autio *et al.*, 2018; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023). On the other hand, the urban-rural divide is considered detrimental to individuals embracing digital technologies in rural contexts (Bergholz *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, the impact of geographic location is also considered in this study. Socioeconomic class was another demographic variable explored under personal demographics. In South Asian countries, socioeconomic class differences are significant, and individuals' behaviours and interactions with environmental factors heavily depend on their socioeconomic class (Riswan, 2014). Especially, when it comes to women in South Asia, their womanhood and motherhood responsibilities are influenced by social structures such as socio-economic class (Liamputtong, 2006). Due to these reasons the researcher decided to explore the impact of socio-economic class towards FDE.

Overall, an exploration of emancipation as a transformative process requires attaining a holistic understanding about the individuals' break free from the extant constraints and activate a profound social transformation, which elevates the status of women and fosters a more equitable society (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009; Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). Thus, at the inception, it is imperative to explore the factors that drive women to disrupt the status quo and free them from conventional power structures (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009; Atarah and Nolan, 2023). Accordingly, this study harnesses the IDTGIT and Intersectionality to explore the factors that drive women to engage in FDE.

3.5 Hypotheses-Direct Relationships

The hypothesis formulated based on the conceptual framework are elaborated in the below section. These hypotheses will be tested through an empirical investigation in order to establish relationships between key variables in the given context.

3.5.1 Environmental Influences

The environmental influences that will be explored through this study are economic instability, attitude towards women and formal institutional support.

3.5.1.1 Economic Instability

There is a lack of consensus regarding the impact of unstable economic conditions on entrepreneurship; some scholars favour that economic instabilities positively affect entrepreneurship, while others favour negative effects (Peris-Ortiz *et al*. 2014). Many of the previous studies substantiate that the drive towards entrepreneurship among individuals is high in periods of economic crisis (Constant and Zimmermann, 2004; Fairlie, 2013; Payne, 2015). With the shrinking of economies, unemployment rates will increase, which works as a "push factor" for individuals to pursue entrepreneurial careers (Vegetti and Adăscăliţei, 2017). This indicates that the depriving conditions experienced by individuals may make them necessity-based entrepreneurs. Thus, economic instabilities may drive entrepreneurial intention among individuals. In light of female entrepreneurship, Boehe and Cruz (2013) emphasise that despite economic instabilities and institutional voids, women have better debt repayment performance than their male counterparts. Alhothali and Al-Dajani (2022) emphasised that female digital entrepreneurs showed much higher drive and resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic. Bullough and Renko (2017) emphasised that women from developing countries are more immune to unstable economic conditions as they go through many challenges day in and day out, and as a result, female entrepreneurs tend to thrive. Conversely, many previous studies substantiate the debilitating effects of economic instability on entrepreneurial businesses. It was substantiated that with the increase in inflation, household income will go down significantly, and poverty will be more apparent,

which makes the survival of SMEs evolving around the households more challenging (Rasul *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, some scholars have illustrated that unemployment resulting from economic instabilities deprives individuals of the necessary resources and networks critical for initiating entrepreneurial businesses (Audretsch and Acs, 1994). Credit facility restrictions stemming from the economic crises also work as a pivotal factor in discouraging nascent entrepreneurs, as many entrepreneurial individuals rely on credit facilities (Carbo-Valverde *et al.* 2016). The GEM report specifically targeting women's entrepreneurship emphasised that economic instabilities stemming from the pandemic resulted in women perceiving more barriers to initiating entrepreneurial ventures than their male counterparts (Elam *et al.*, 2021).

In the Sri Lankan context, job losses from economic instabilities are high, and expenses are escalating rapidly, which results in the survival of families becoming more challenging (UN Women, 2022). As a way to help families thrive in adverse conditions, women tend to shoulder economic responsibilities (Paul and Sarma, 2013). Especially as people have invested in digital devices during the pandemic, they become more hands-on with digital technologies, making it possible for them to initiate digital businesses (Hemachandra and Sharkasi, 2021a, 2021b; Matoušková, 2022). Furthermore, with increased costs, digital solutions can be assumed to be more effective for women rather than investing in physical stores. Although credit facility restrictions are unavoidable during an economic crisis (Carbo-Valverde *et al.* 2016), their impact is generally less significant for women, as they tend to rely more on informal funding sources. Therefore, by carefully exploring the extant literature and the context of Sri Lanka, it was hypothesised that economic instability positively influence female digital entrepreneurial intention.

H1: Economic instability positively influences women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context

3.5.1.2 Attitude towards Women

Findings of the studies related to different contexts substantiate that societal attitudes towards gender play a pivotal role in women's career choices. In contexts where societal attitudes towards women are positive, they tend to positively influence female career choices as

entrepreneurs (Vossenberg, 2013). According to a study conducted in the US context to explore the changes in attitudes towards women in the workforce, it became evident that new generations tend to have a more positive attitude towards working women, which has positively impacted workforce participation among US women (Donnelly *et al.*, 2016). Specifically, for women to engage in those occupational roles that are strongly recognised as male-dominated jobs, the broader society's attitude towards women as competent persons to take up such roles plays a pivotal role (Trauth & Connolly, 2021). Thus, the broader society's positive attitude towards women plays a prominent role towards their engagement in occupational roles.

Based on Welter (2004) societal attitudes towards women as misfits for entrepreneurial roles persist even in developed countries, which have achieved a better state of gender equality, and these attitudes serve as a barrier to female entrepreneurship. In the Sri Lankan context, societal attitudes toward women are moulded as an integration of the conventional patriarchal traditional cultural norms common to South Asia and the discourses of equality infused by the Buddhist doctrine. Therefore, when compared to the neighbouring South Asian countries, Sri Lankan women enjoy a better position, where extreme gender-based violence experienced by women in other countries, such as honour killings, dowry deaths, and gender-based feticide, is not being practised in Sri Lanka (Banu, 2016a). Despite the Buddhist value system's strong influence which favours equality (Fernando & Cohen, 2013), Sri Lankan society is still dominated by the cultural values shaped by male-dominant patriarchal gender norms (Hewamanne, 2020). Deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms, together with the institutional voids, ensure that attitudes towards women are more bound by the extent to which they meet their role expectations, and women's failure to meet those expectations will have backlash effects on them (Kodagoda, 2010; Kodagoda and Samaratunge, 2023; Nayakaratne and Perera, 2024). Although it may seem at first glance that modern socioeconomic changes have positively transformed societal attitudes towards women, appreciating their participation in economic, educational, and political spheres, a deeper examination reveals a more complex reality. Women's roles have indeed expanded, but much of their effort is directed towards achieving economic empowerment while still fulfilling the traditional roles of dutiful wives and mothers. This dual burden often leads to significant physical

and mental exhaustion for many women. Thus, exploring how the societal attitude towards women influences women's engagement in FDE is imperative.

H2: Attitudes about women in the workforce positively influence women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.

3.5.1.3 Formal Institutional Support

Achieving gender equality and empowering women being one of the sustainable development goals identified by the United Nations (United Nations, 2015), governments of all member states are taking progressive initiatives towards uplifting the conditions of women. Support in child and elderly care facilities, training opportunities and workshops provided by the government, and financial assistance provided through formal institutions will work as enablers for women to engage in entrepreneurial activities (Jamali, 2009). The positive impact of formal institutional support on female entrepreneurship has been substantiated in previous studies conducted in diverse contextual conditions (Aidis, Estrin and Mickiewicz, 2012; Al-Kwifi *et al.*, 2020; Xie *et al.*, 2021). Having a stable and formalised legal system and regulations that define socially acceptable behaviour will augment the drive of entrepreneurs to engage in entrepreneurial activities, as having such a support system will make the navigation of the challenging entrepreneurial pathway more comfortable (Lim *et al.*, 2010; Webb, Khoury and Hitt, 2020). Based on a study conducted in rural Sweden, women entrepreneurs perceive that improving the local governmental authority's support for micro-enterprise owners will enhance women's engagement in entrepreneurial activities (Sandberg, 2003). Similarly, the positive influence of formal institutional support towards female entrepreneurship has been proven in previous studies (Ranasinghe, 2008; Yousafzai, Saeed and Muffatto, 2015). Conversely, Kazumi and Kawai (2017) found that formal institutional support does not have a positive influence on boosting the confidence of female entrepreneurs.

Formal institutional support enables the streamlining of the emerging field of FDE by shaping it into a more structured and gender-inclusive field, allowing women to overcome the double-gender bind. When it comes to the influence of strong institutional support, it is pivotal in digital entrepreneurship because, regarding this novel area, there are many blurred aspects related

to business models and legal structures (Adikaram and Razik, 2023). It is evident that in the Sri Lankan context, authorities are still deprived of having a robust understanding of STEM business models, and most of the administrative work is centered around the commercial hub of the country, Colombo, which requires women to travel for long distances which are considered as riskier and inappropriate for the female role (Adikaram and Razik, 2023). Furthermore, the government plays a central role in enhancing digital infrastructure, which is crucial in promoting digital entrepreneurship (Ahlstrom and Bruton, 2002). Considering all these aspects, it is posited that the impact of formal institutional support towards FDE needs to be explored.

H3: Perceived formal institutional support positively influences women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.

3.5.2 Individual Influences

Under the individual influences, personal influences and personal characteristics, related hypotheses were developed. Personal influences mainly emphasise the influence exerted by significant people and the substantial life experiences of an individual (Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Role models and family support were identified as the variables that come under personal influences, and previous work experience was identified as a significant life experience. Personal characteristics-related variables were internal motivation, digital self-efficacy, and fear of failure.

3.5.2.1 Role Models

Role models have the potential to empower individuals, as observing others to whom individuals can relate to will enable them to inculcate a strong conviction that they are also equally capable of attaining similar goals, which leads to fostering their confidence (Molina-López *et al.*, 2021). Even the early literature on the feminist perspective of female labour force participation substantiates the positive impact of role models towards redefining socially constructed definitions of gender and gender identity in the organisational context (Ely, 1994). Women who have broken traditional gender norms and reached new heights will create a positive mental image in the minds of other women, motivating them to follow the same path. The positive influence of role models towards nurturing entrepreneurs has been proven in previous studies (Scherer *et al.*, 1989; BarNir,

Watson and Hutchins, 2011; Shao-Hui, Ping and Peng-Peng, 2011). The influence of role models is particularly significant in the domain of female entrepreneurship, given that there are a handful of women who have become successful in this male-dominated arena (Noguera, Alvarez and Urbano, 2013). In the female entrepreneurship literature, the lack of role models was recognised as a barrier to female entrepreneurship, and literature signifies the importance of promoting role models to gain social legitimacy towards female entrepreneurship rather than perceiving it as a conflicting behaviour to the established gender norms (Wennberg, Pathak and Autio, 2013; Panda, 2018; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020).

When it comes to a novel field with limited awareness, people often tend to emulate those who have already taken up that field, as there are no society-wide accepted norms and knowledge regarding how the field operates (Poggesi *et al*., 2020). FDE is one such novel area, and women's conviction in stepping into this area will heavily influenced by the experiences of those women who have taken bold steps to deviate from the status quo. Even at the preliminary, informal interviews, respondents also discussed the imperative role of role models and the scarcity of role models, which underscores the need to explore the impact of role models further in relation to FDE.

H4: Role models exert a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.

3.5.2.2 Family Support

The immense role played by the family domain towards initiating and successfully conducting entrepreneurial businesses has been substantiated by much of the previous literature (Welsh *et al.*, 2018; Neneh and Welsh, 2022). The family plays a crucial role in providing financial and social capital for entrepreneurial women, and the continuous guidance and inspiration from parents can be considered vital in building their confidence to take on entrepreneurial roles (Carter *et al.*, 2003; Tiwari and Shastri, 2023). Family embeddedness in female entrepreneurship is more apparent as they rely heavily on family members for assistance in terms of physical resources, business advice and emotional support (Roomi cited in 2011, Kazumi and Kawai, 2017; Jennings

& Brush, 2013). As substantiated by the previous literature, potential female entrepreneurs' judgement in terms of their capability to engage in entrepreneurial behaviour is heavily reliant on family support (Jennings and Brush, 2013; Kazumi and Kawai, 2017; Shukla *et al.*, 2021). Even in countries with strict patriarchal gender norms, which are further elevated by the formal institutional voids, family encouragement is recognised to have a positive impact towards the spirit of female entrepreneurs (McElwee and Al-Riyami, 2003; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). Also, when it comes to the IT sector involvement of women, perceived support from the parents is deemed to have greater impact on women to pursue IT careers despite the double-gender bind they experience (Hatlevik *et al.*, 2018; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Studies related to women in STEM entrepreneurship also substantiate that support received from the family was the strongest pillar of success for these women (Adikaram and Razik, 2023; Treanor, 2022).

In male-dominant patriarchal societies, the family can be a reinforcing factor or restraining factor of female entrepreneurship (Kamberidou, 2020). In patriarchal societies with male-headed families, the blessings and the support received from the male family members are imperative for female family members to start a business (Atarah and Nolan, 2023). South Asian women who are born and bred under strong patriarchal gender norms pay huge attention towards family blessings and social legitimacy when it comes to key decisions related to their lives, ranging from education, marriage, and career choices (Mishra, 2013; Hewamanne, 2020). Given the nested and home-bound way of living experienced by South Asian women, their family often becomes their primary point of reference for career decisions. Thus, it can be hypothesised that family support works as a strong antecedent for self-efficacy, which in turn results in entrepreneurial intention.

H5 Family support positively influences women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.

3.5.2.3 Previous Work Experience

Prior work experience will give an opportunity for an individual to learn through hands-on experience, which enables them to gain mastery experience, which is imperative towards establishing confidence and conviction within an entrepreneur (Cox, Mueller, and Moss, 2002). The impact of previous work experience towards strengthening a women's intention to engage in

entrepreneurship was substantiated in the previous studies (Zhao, Hills and Seibert, 2005; Jayawarna, Rouse and Kitching, 2013; Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017; Kazumi and Kawai, 2017; Madawala, Foroudi and Palazzo, 2023) where the experience they have previously attained enables them to face business-related and institutional challenges more practically.

Women can bridge the gaps in knowledge, skills and competencies resulting from the conventional educational system through their engagement in employment (Mackenzie, 2023). Especially given the IT education lagging in the Sri Lankan context (Sachitra and Chinthaka, 2022), work experience serves as a great platform for women to sharpen their digital competencies. Even though the business models, interactions and markets for digital entrepreneurship differ from conventional physical business operations, experience attained even from a conventional business can also be imperative when they try to get involved with digital entrepreneurial ventures (Storey and Greene, 2010; Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017). Substantiating the pivotal role played by prior experience towards female entrepreneurship, most previous studies identified lack of experience and training opportunities as a vital barrier for female entrepreneurship (Raghuvanshi, Agrawal and Ghosh, 2017; Panda, 2018). Work experiences will not only sharpen the business knowledge of women but also help them understand the possible challenges they may face when trying to establish an entrepreneurial identity. Henceforth, prior work experience is expected to positively influence women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka.

H6: Previous work experiences positively influence women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.

3.5.2.4 Digital Self-Efficacy

Digital self-efficacy (DSE) is a predominant predictor of efficacious completion of activities relating to ICT usage (Hatlevik *et al.*, 2018). While digital entrepreneurship entails the effective utilisation of digital technologies, the DSE provides valuable insights into individuals' decision-making, the level of effort they invest, and their persistence in pursuing entrepreneurial activities. Thus, DSE can be recognised as a critical concept for explaining entrepreneurial behaviour. Previous empirical studies substantiate the direct effect of DSE towards women's

engagement in digital-related activities in different contexts (McGee *et al.*, 2009; Molina-López *et al.*, 2021; Maran *et al.*, 2022). Emphasising the imperative role played by self-efficacy towards the successful accomplishment of a task, Trauth and Connolly (2021) highlight that even those individuals lacking certain skills can still complete a task successfully, if they have high levels of self-efficacy. Furthermore, DSE substantially contributes to the success of individuals in digital technology fields, particularly as these technologies continue to evolve at a rapid pace. Embracing new technology and fostering confidence in learning are vital qualities for individuals looking to thrive in this dynamic landscape. With the male gendered connotation given to both ICT and entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship is often perceived as a predominantly male gendered domain, which may result in women perceiving low DSE. The societal perceptions of women as less competent individuals, combined with low digital skills and entrepreneurial capabilities, can exacerbate the challenges women face when navigating these male-dominated pathways (Adikaram and Razik, 2023). As DSE plays a predominant role in studying FDE, it is imperative to investigate the impact of DSE on FDE.

H7 Digital self-efficacy positively influences women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.

3.5.2.5 Internal motivation

Motivation plays a central role in determining an individual's desire and commitment to engage in an entrepreneurial process (Baumol, 1968). While external influences are crucial, entrepreneurial individuals are at the heart of discussions about entrepreneurial ventures (Guevara-Otero *et al.*, 2025). When examining early definitions of entrepreneurship, scholars have predominantly relied on entrepreneurial traits (Casson and Casson, 2014; Gartner, 1995; Hedner *et al*., 2017; Kamineni, 2002) to define entrepreneurship. Thus, the internal motivation of a particular individual influences her decision to engage in digital entrepreneurship. Contrary to the prevailing assumption that women in resource-constrained emerging economies engage in entrepreneurship primarily for survival purposes (Atarah and Nolan, 2023; Solesvik, Iakovleva and Trifilova, 2019; Adom and Anambane, 2019), recent studies present contradictory findings. Evidence suggests that these women also pursue entrepreneurship driven by intrinsic motivations

and a robust desire to achieve personal goals (Patil and Deshpande, 2019; Hewamanne, 2020). This shift in perspective highlights the complexity of entrepreneurial motivations among women in developing contexts, indicating that aspirations beyond mere survival may significantly influence their entrepreneurial endeavours. For instance, a study by Adikaram and Razik (2023) on STEM entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka revealed that pull factors play a predominant role in encouraging women to engage in STEM entrepreneurship. Furthermore, research has also substantiated that women's desire for work-life balance is the foremost motive that drives them to engage in online businesses (Tahir *et al.*, 2020; Anwar and Daniel, 2016). As an individual's motivation is derived from a complex combination of motivational factors (Kirkwood, 2009; Adikaram and Razik, 2023) through this study, the researcher attempts to explore how internal motivation, as a complex integration of motivational factors, influences women's intention to engage in FDE.

H9 Internal motivation positively influences women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.

3.5.3 Individual Identity

Under the individual identity construct, the particular demographic variables investigated in this study include marital status, geographical location, level of education, and social class. Exploring the impact of demographic variables on women's intention to engage in FDE is imperative because these demographic factors intersect with gender and shape the experience of FDE. Exploring FDE from an intersectional perspective, Dy, Marlow and Martin (2017) emphasised that even though the widely accepted notion highlights that digital entrepreneurship enables women to overcome the barriers that women experience in the brick and mortar world as their gender intersects with other social ascriptions, women's navigation in the digital entrepreneurial pathways are constrained by their identity shaped by social ascriptions such as race, class and geographic location.

3.5.3.1 Marital Status

Despite the industry to which a particular individual is attached, marital status is recognised as a pivotal factor influencing women's labour force participation (Simoes, Crespo and Moreira, 2016). Although marriage can hinder women's participation in formal employment due to rigid work schedules and the expectation to be away from home, it may simultaneously encourage self-employment by offering the flexibility needed to accommodate both economic activity and domestic responsibilities (Simoes, Crespo and Moreira, 2016; Ajefu, 2019; Atarah and Nolan, 2023). Marriage plays a central role in the lives of South Asian women and is often regarded as the culmination of womanhood (Mishra, 2006). Despite the influences of socio-economic changes, marriage is still considered the foremost factor that determines the success of South Asian women. Based on the deeply rooted gender norms, even from a very young age, South Asian girls are taught, advised and trained to take up the role of "good mother" and "good wife" after their marriage, as society expects women to prioritise the family after their marriage. In South Asia, marital status significantly influences women's career decisions, as many women prioritise familial responsibilities over professional aspirations. Marriage-related constraints do not apply only to married women. Instead, marriage plays a constraining role in single women's lives as well. Even a single woman expects to make conscious decisions about her career choices because, to set up good marriage prospects in the future, she has to engage in careers that are appropriate for women. Therefore, single women may be more pressured to perceive socially desirable careers than follow their inner instincts. Overall, it can be perceived that there is a complex relationship between marital status and FDE. On the one hand, it is expected that self-employment is desired by married women due to the flexibility it offers. On the other hand, perceiving digital entrepreneurship as a male-dominated domain can negatively impact single women's engagement in FDE, as it may have adverse implications for their future marriages. Thus, it is imperative to explore how marital status influences FDE intention among women in South Asia.

H10 Married women exhibit a higher intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.

3.5.3.2 Socioeconomic Class

Social class is another variable that cannot be excluded from the discussion of entrepreneurship, as one's social class tends to impact an individual's entrepreneurial aspirations. Marlow, Hicks and Treanor (2019, p 40) highlight that based on the extant literature, *the normative stereotype of the entrepreneur to be a white, middle-class, middle-aged male*… showcases the central role played by the social class in entrepreneurship. An individual's social class plays a significant role in determining access to resources, skills, and networks, which are essential for success in the entrepreneurial process. Jayawarna, Rouse and Kitching (2013) emphasised that an individual's position within the social structure based on class plays a vital role in shaping the constraints and reinforcements that individuals face related to entrepreneurship. Academic experts emphasise the importance of exploring the impact of social class on FDE because class as a social marker can intersect with gender and may create a differential impact towards women from different social classes (Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017a; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020). Based on a study conducted by Dy et al. (2017; 2018) related to the digital entrepreneurial experiences of British women, it was found that class plays a restrictive role in women's engagement in FDE. This extant literature sheds light on the importance of exploring the impact of social class on women's engagement in FDE. While social class and the caste system were two key aspects that dominated social stratification in Sri Lankan history, socioeconomic changes over time have led to a gradual decline of the caste system (Riswan, 2021). Although the caste system is declining, social class remains a significant factor influencing an individual's economic activities. Therefore, in this study, the researcher was motivated to explore the impact of socio-economic class on women's intention to engage in FDE in the Sri Lankan context.

H11 High socioeconomic class exerts a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka.

3.5.3.3 Educational Attainment

Education has long been recognised as the pathway to enhance essential skills and knowledge that enable individuals to thrive in their careers; researchers have made an effort to explore the impact of educational accomplishments towards female entrepreneurship (Molina-López *et al.*, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2024). Based on the findings of the previous studies, it was substantiated that women with higher levels of education showcase better performance in the entrepreneurial landscape, where they have better abilities to identify opportunities, come up with novel business ideas, and successfully navigate the complexities of the entrepreneurial arena (Jayawarna, Rouse and Kitching, 2013; Akma Saidi *et al.*, 2017; Welsh *et al.*, 2018; Endalew, 2020). While the findings imply that entrepreneurial businesses run by educationally accomplished women entrepreneurs perform better when compared to their counterparts (Molina-López *et al.*, 2021), many researchers have highlighted the lack of educational accomplishments derived as a result of social marginalisation experienced by women work as the foremost barrier for them to thrive in entrepreneurship (Panda, 2018). Especially when it comes to the IT sector, it was recognised that women's access to IT sector careers is mainly confined due to the poor education they have attained (Novo-Corti, Varela-Candamio and García-Álvarez, 2014). Therefore, exploring the impact of educational accomplishments towards FDE in the Sri Lankan context is paramount.

H12 Educational attainment exerts a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka.

3.5.3.4 Geographical Location

The impact of geographic location has been recognised as a critical factor affecting an individual's ability to harness the potential of digital technologies. Much of the literature highlights the prevalence of the urban-rural digital divide, which positions women in rural areas at a

disadvantage in terms of their access to the internet (Novo-Corti, Varela-Candamio and García-Álvarez, 2014; Gerli and Whalley, 2022). Based on a study conducted by Adikaram and Razik (2023), challenges for female STEM entrepreneurs are more acute for women in rural areas than those in urban areas like Colombo. Exploring the impact of geographical location towards women's intention to engage in male-dominant sectors such as STEM entrepreneurship and IT careers, the authors emphasised that women who are brought up in rural areas become victims of conventional gendered norms, which make it difficult for them to thrive in male-dominated fields (Trauth and Connolly, 2021; Adikaram and Razik, 2023). Thus, it is presumed that the influence of geographical location in Sri Lanka can come from different perspectives. On one hand, women in rural areas may be deprived of access to digital technologies compared to urban women, which may adversely impact their engagement in FDE (SLASSCOM and International Finance Corporation, 2021). On the other hand, patriarchal gender norms are presumed to be more stringent in rural areas when compared to urban areas, which may have adverse effects towards women presuming careers in male-dominated fields. As geographical location plays an interesting role in FDE, it was further investigated in the context of Sri Lanka.

H13 Living in an urban area positively influences women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka.

3.6 Hypotheses-Moderators

Introducing well theoretically grounded moderator variables is recognised as a potent way to attain more realistic and holistic findings related to the study (Namazi and Namazi, 2016). In light of the insights received from the previous literature, two demographic variables, namely geographic location and marital status, were presumed to moderate the relationship between internal motivations and women's intention to engage in FDE. Furthermore, fear of failure was recognised to moderate the relationship between DSE and intention to engage in FDE.

3.6.1 Fear of Failure as a Moderator

Based on Patzelt & Shepherd (2011), fear of failure is recognised as one of the most prominent negative emotions related to self-employment. Entrepreneurship is inherently linked with risk-taking and uncertainty, and an entrepreneurial individual's fear of failure can be

identified as a key factor inhibiting entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Wennberg, Pathak and Autio, 2013). Fear of failure is heavily discussed in entrepreneurship studies where most of these prior research explores the direct relationship between the fear of failure and entrepreneurial intention (Minniti and Arenius, 2003; Noguera, Alvarez and Urbano, 2013; Ng and Jenkins, 2018). However, insufficient academic attention has been given to perceiving fear of failure as an emotional state which affects the relationship between self-efficacy and entrepreneurial intention. Higher risk aversion among women is axiomatic, which may result in women having self-doubts about their capabilities to take up an entrepreneurial role, which involves high-risk taking (Fossen, 2009). In the realm of FDE, when a lack of social support combines with self-doubts about one's own efficacy in using digital technologies, it may lead women to perceive higher risks in entrepreneurial careers, thereby increasing their fear of failure. While women's lack of confidence regarding their competencies and skills plays a vital role in the existence of a wider gender gap in the arena of entrepreneurship (Koellinger, Minniti and Schade, 2013), fear of failure can be identified as one of the key factors which can dampen women's self-confidence towards their intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship. Therefore, it was imperative to explore how the relationship between DSE and women's intention to engage in FDE is affected by the fear of failure.

H8 The fear of failure moderates the positive relationship between digital self-efficacy and women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka

3.6.2 Demographic Factors as Moderators

In addition to considering geographical location and marital status as direct variables influencing women's intention to engage in FDE, these two variables were explored as moderators to enhance the variance explained and achieve a more comprehensive understanding. As marriage plays a central role in the lives of South Asian women (Mishra, 2013; Perera, Ganeshan, and Belitski, 2021), in addition to exploring the direct relationship between marital status and FDE intention, the researcher makes an effort to examine how marital status influences the relationship between internal motivation and intention. Marital status changes a woman's life, introducing additional dynamics such as childcare and family care responsibilities, financial stability, and

husband's involvement, which may either aggravate or mitigate the relationship between internal motives and a woman's intention to engage in FDE. The effect of marital status on women's career choices has been explored in various contexts, with findings consistently highlighting the negative impact of marital status on women's engagement in careers (Ting et al., 2024). However, regarding female entrepreneurship, the effect of marriage on entrepreneurial intentions is not universally negative; where some literature substantiate that certain women's desires to engage in entrepreneurial ventures is reinforced by their marriage as they perceive it as a way to strike a balance between work and family (Trivedi and Petkova, 2021). Furthermore, Stamm *et al.* (2024) found that marriage is a focal resource for the long-term commitment of female entrepreneurs compared to their male counterparts. Especially when it comes to digital entrepreneurship, with digital affordances, women can engage in FDE based on their preferred schedule and in the comfort of their homes, which may strengthen the impact of motives towards FDE intention. Furthermore, the strict social surveillance experienced by single girls (Abeyasekera, 2017) may restrain them from transforming their digital entrepreneurial motives into intentions. Due to the lack of social awareness and visibility of digital entrepreneurship, single women in Sri Lanka may suppress their digital entrepreneurial dreams, as they do not want to be the victims of societal backlash, which may have adverse effects on their future marriage prospects and life decisions. As a result, they may make conscious decisions to wait till marriage to realise their digital entrepreneurial dreams patiently. By examining this moderating effect, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how marital status influences the relationship between motivation and intention.

H14 Marital status moderates the positive relationship between internal motivation and women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka

Geographical location is another demographic factor for which the study aims to uncover both direct and moderating effects. Geographic location plays a central role in exploring the emancipatory potential of FDE, as the relationship between geographical location and FDE is viewed from different perspectives. Widely accepted notions highlight that through digital affordances, women can blur the geographical boundaries they experience in the brick-and-mortar world which enable them to reach broader customers, role models and new knowledge (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023). While some researchers

acknowledge digital entrepreneurship as a liberating pathway as it enables one to overcome geographical barriers, others have emphasised that one's engagement in digital entrepreneurship is constrained due to geographical factors such as limitations in digital infrastructure and access to ICT education (Gerli and Whalley, 2022; Bergholz *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, patriarchal gender norms are more stringent in rural areas (Hewamanne, 2020; Adikaram and Razik, 2023), which makes it difficult for women to pursue non-conventional careers. Thus, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of a woman's geographical location, it is essential to examine how this location influences the relationship between internal motives and her intention to engage in FDE.

H15 Geographic location moderates the positive relationship between internal motivation and women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter focused on presenting the proposed conceptual framework, and hypotheses related to the quantitative study. Grounded on the theoretical insights received from the IDTGIT (Trauth and Quesenberry, 2006; Trauth and Connolly, 2021) and empirical insights received from the preliminary informal interviews, a conceptual framework was developed which illustrates the key relationships among the variables. The hypotheses were developed with the support of extant literature to reflect the expected relationships among variables and these hypotheses provide a structured approach to examining the research problem. Potential moderating effects were also explained, as these moderating effects offer a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. In the subsequent chapters, an appropriate quantitative methodological approach to test the hypotheses will be discussed, and the proposed hypotheses will be empirically tested.

Chapter Four

Research Methodology

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide a detailed explanation of how the study was conducted, along with justifications for the methods applied. The structure of the chapter will be given in Figure 4.1 below. The philosophical paradigm guiding this particular study will be elaborated at the chapter's inception. Next, the appropriateness of the mixed-methods approach will be explained with sufficient justification. An overview of the overall research design will be provided. Then the appropriateness of selecting Sri Lanka as the research site was thoroughly elaborated, highlighting its relevance and suitability for addressing the study's objectives. This was followed by a description of the study's sampling procedure. Subsequent sections of the chapter will detail the three stages of the study: informal interviews with key stakeholders, surveys, and in-depth interviews, providing a comprehensive overview of how the study was conducted.

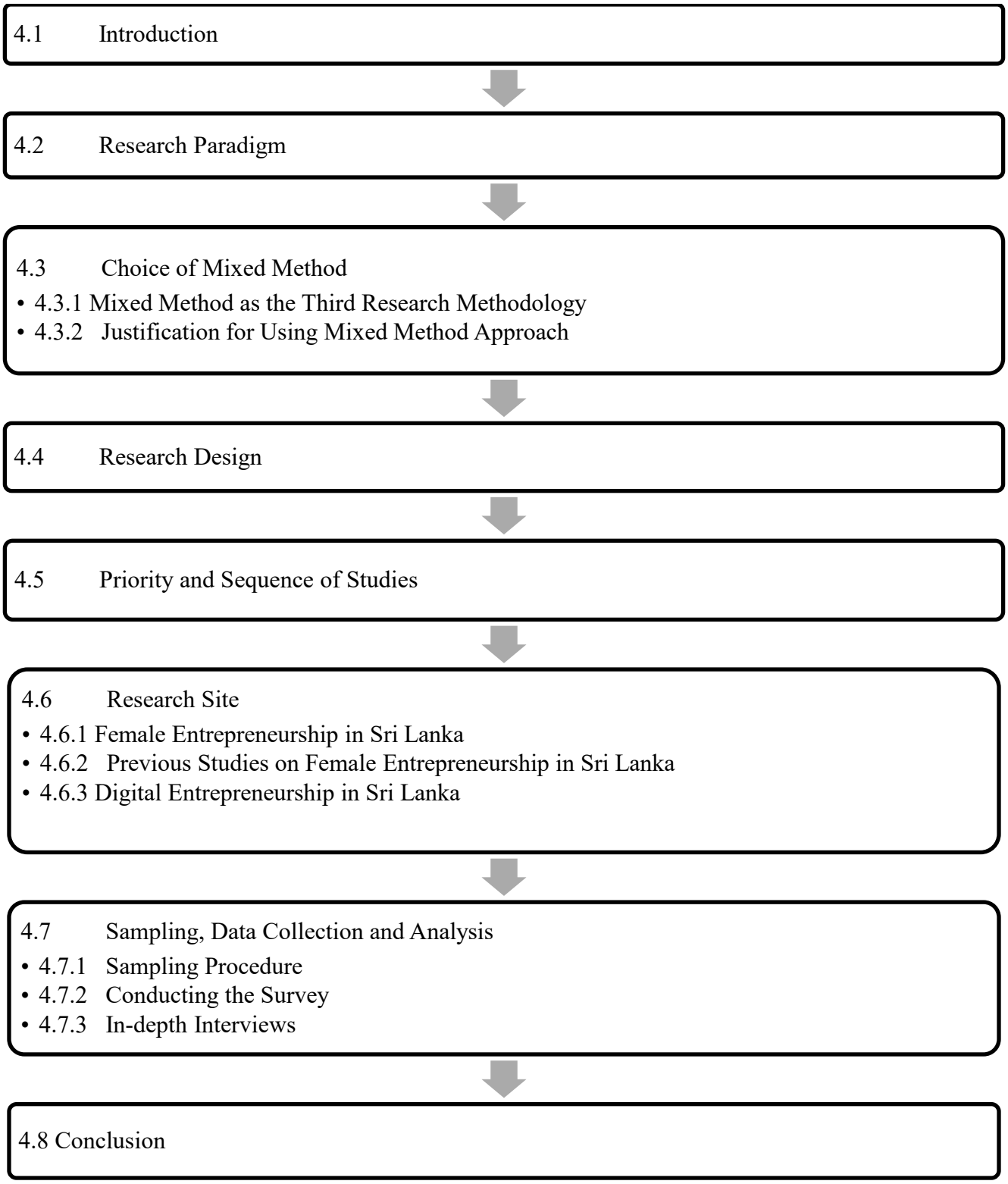

Figure 4.1 Chapter Structure

4.2 Research Paradigm

The researcher's research philosophy derives from the researcher's assumptions about how they view the world (Creswell and Clark, 2007; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2014). The philosophical approach guides the researcher's scholarly thought process and efforts in exploring knowledge, informing where she will position her findings. The philosophy adopted in conducting research is mainly swayed by two philosophical assumptions about reality: ontology and epistemology. Ontology implies the nature of reality, whilst epistemology emphasises how acceptable knowledge about reality can be attained and interpreted (Creswell and Clark, 2007; Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2014). Hence, it is apparent that the researcher's journey in uncovering the truth is more complex and rooted in broader philosophical assumptions, extending beyond mere research strategies and methods. Based on ontological and epistemological assumptions, two extreme philosophical paradigms have been distinguished: positivism and interpretivism. Positivism, which is positioned at one end, evolves around objectively studying the respondents while placing the object of inquiry independent of the researcher (Venkatesh, Brown and Sullivan, 2016). Further, positivists acknowledge that only one truth can be generalised, and the truth can be explored with a considerable degree of certainty by utilising the objective scientific method (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2014).

While the positivist paradigm closely mirrors the research methodology of the natural sciences, its applicability in the social sciences is subject to significant questioning. This skepticism arises from the contextual and subjective nature of the research subjects within the social sciences, which often differs markedly from the controlled and objective phenomena typically studied in the natural sciences. Appreciating subjectivity and how truth is intertwined with the person who experiences it, interpretivism is positioned at the opposite extreme of the continuum, contrary to positivism. From the interpretivist perspective, generalisation overlooking the context is heavily criticised as interpretivists believe that it is illogical to deviate the knower from the known as what is known is substantially subject to the knower (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Molina-López *et al.*, 2021). Positivism and interpretivism are recognised as the two extreme ends of the continuum, and these paradigms guide the researcher in the direction of research methods and strategies. Based on these conflicting philosophical paradigms, broader research methods have

been established, where quantitative and qualitative approaches are aligned with positivism and interpretivism, respectively (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2014).

Positivism and interpretivism being at the two extreme ends of the philosophical approaches, a scholarly community emerged that rejected the embracing of hard positivism or interpretivism. They came up with research philosophies espousing philosophical approaches based on circumstances. As a “third way” amidst positivism and interpretivism middle ground research paradigm variants pragmatism and critical realism attained much recognition in social sciences research over time (Sousa, 2010; Elder-Vass, 2022). While pragmatism and critical realism can both be recognised as 'third ways' between positivism and interpretivism, the researcher opted for 'pragmatism'. From several perspectives, pragmatists and critical realists have similar assumptions about human knowledge. Both these schools of thought take the form of anti-foundationalism and advocate a fallibilist understanding of knowledge (Elder-Vass, 2022; Elder-Vass and Zotzmann, 2022). Due to the variety of pragmatism and varying interpretations around critical realism, clear demarcation between both by drawing a fine line between two philosophies is much enigmatic.

Critical realism evolves around the ideology that conflation amongst structure, agency and culture pave the way for complex reality that can only be observed through social scientific analysis but not through observable human actions (Archer, 1998; Archer *et al.*, 1999). Even though critical realism (CR) rejected the ontological and epistemological assumptions around positivism and interpretivism, CR does not undermine the conventional explanation of research philosophy in social sciences in light of ontology and epistemology. The ontological assumption of CR is that the existence of reality is beyond the perception of individuals and cannot be fully understood, and epistemological assumption, on the other hand, evolve around the conception that knowledge is based on individuals interpretation of it based on the emotions, beliefs and experiences (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010; Elder-Vass, 2022). While critical realism has also been lean towards the conventional research paradigms evolving around the ontology and epistemology of reality, pragmatism, as a philosophical approach, focuses more on practical aspects of methodology (Morgan, 2014). Pragmatism is not a single philosophy; it is rather a style or a way

of doing philosophy, whereas truth in pragmatism is more to do with regarding what practically works in the real world (Morgan, 1998, 2014; Denzin, 2012; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). While pragmatists have been apathetic about understanding the nature of truth, which can be considered as the backbone of the other research paradigms, it envisages more process-focused approach to knowledge, in which inquiry plays a dominant role in defining process (Mingers 2002, Rorty, 2022, Morgan, 2014). Thus, it can determine that pragmatism as a paradigm provides a more insightful approach to knowledge, emphasising researchers' need to rely on more circumstances-driven choices to conduct research. Archer *et al.* (1999) emphasized that researchers' philosophical stance should be able to determine what researcher will be explored through the study, what will be excluded and how the study will be conducted. Even though the pragmatism does not approach the knowledge by attributing paramount significance on the nature of truth (like other research paradigms) as a research paradigm it provides holistic perspective on deriving at the process of exploring the truth which has been recognized as a prime task of a research paradigm by Archer. Furthermore, the process of inquiry in pragmatism which primarily emphasize on cyclical process of individual' beliefs and actions which are inherently shaped up by the contextual, emotional, and social aspects (Morgan, 2014). Therefore despite of the claim made by the proponents of critical realism that pragmatism misgiving the social structure when providing social explanation (Elder-Vass, 2022) deep insights on pragmatism's inquiry approach, which evolve around action and beliefs cyclical relationship make it clear that structures, agency and culture are well accounted in the knowledge attained through pragmatism. Overall, as pragmatism encourages choosing the most appropriate research approach that provides significant benefits in the given circumstances, and exploring experiences while considering the contextual, emotional, and social embedded nature of those, pragmatism will be recognized as the research philosophy for this study. When opting for the pragmatist paradigm for this study, the researcher agrees with Venkatesh, Brown and Bala's (2013) view that researchers should not perceive paradigms as obstacles when researching to address a research problem in a reasonable and a theory grounded manner and construct a substantive theory related to the phenomenon. Rather the focus should be towards aligning a research method apprehend-able and scholarly rigorous.

Pragmatism posits that reality is heterogeneous and ever-changing, as individuals' behaviours shape it. Thus, exploring the truth can be achieved by applying methods that are recognised as practical in a given context (Bryant, 2009). Research questions are the central concern of pragmatism, and the research methods applicable to address the problem will depend primarily on research questions and the context related to the research questions (Greene and Caracelli, 2003). Rather than making forced choices regarding research methods based on two extreme paradigms, pragmatism favours addressing research questions by adopting pluralistic approaches that best suit the practical solution to the problem. While quantitative and qualitative approaches align with the paradigms of positivism and interpretivism, pragmatism is the most suitable research paradigm for the mixed methods approach. Pragmatist philosophy highlights the need and possibility of combining research approaches to effectively address research questions, and it challenges the notion that qualitative and quantitative methods are incompatible (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Harrison, 2013; Fox and Connolly, 2018). Converse to the widely accepted notion that quantitative and qualitative approaches are incompatible and cannot be integrated, scholars favouring pragmatism have substantiated that embracing a combination of various paradigms and methodological choices will enable enhanced academic rigour, in-depth understanding and more richness to the way particular research questions are being addressed (Creswell and Clark, 2007; Denzin, 2012; Venkatesh, Brown and Sullivan, 2016). While the purist quantitative approach is enthused by positivism and the qualitative approach is inspired by interpretivism, dominating research in the social sciences, the mixed methods approach, steered by pragmatism, is gaining popularity in the contemporary context (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Pragmatism is a philosophical stance that emphasises the practicality and utility of an approach or methodology. It values the use of research designs and methods in a practical manner that are most effective in achieving the study's goals and addressing the research questions, without strict adherence to a single philosophical or methodological framework (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Therefore, this study is grounded in a pragmatist epistemological perspective due to pragmatism's flexibility and practical nature

4.3 Choice of Mixed Method

4.3.1 Mixed Method as the Third Research Methodology

The mixed-methods approach, guided by pragmatism, is considered a viable research method as it eradicates the dichotomy between quantitative methods driven by positivism and qualitative methods driven by interpretivism. Pragmatism views knowledge as something that is created through practical engagement with real-world problems rather than derived from any single philosophical stance. The quantitative research approach that aligns with positivism is criticised for context-free generalisation. Through such context-free generalisation, it will not be possible to fully understand the research questions in social sciences, which are mostly embedded with the context (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, quantitative studies are criticised for not being able to provide an in-depth understanding of respondents' viewpoints and interrogation of novel phenomena (Creswell and Clark, 2007; Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2012). On the other hand, in qualitative studies, researcher bias is not uncommon due to the researcher's in-depth engagement with participants, leading to a researcher's immersion in the subject matter, which can inadvertently influence the researcher's perspective and interpretation of data (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). As qualitative and quantitative approaches have their strengths and weaknesses, integrating the two approaches will enable a broader and more realistic understanding of the phenomenon, as one method will help alleviate the limitations related to the other method.

According to Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), the mixed-methods approach involves combining at least one quantitative method with one qualitative method to achieve a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the research problem. However, there is a lack of definitional consensus regarding mixed methods due to the multifaceted procedures involved in combining methods that all fall within the broader framework of mixed methods (Creswell and Clark, 2007). Adopting a mixed-method approach in social science research has been praised for many reasons, namely to offset the disadvantages presented by qualitative and quantitative approaches when used independently (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Harrison, 2013; Venkatesh, Brown and Bala, 2013; Eliakis *et al.*, 2020); to engage in developing and testing of

theory concurrently; to reach strengthened inferences than relying on a single methodological approach and to bring more richness to the study by integrating divergent point of views from diverse perspectives (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2012; Venkatesh, Brown and Bala, 2013). Even though the mixed-methods approach has been recognised as a means to overcome the disadvantages associated with quantitative and qualitative studies, it does not mean that the mixed-methods approach is free from any weaknesses. Social science research primarily involves examining context-embedded phenomena where the existence of the research object is intertwined with numerous factors and forces that create a complex phenomenon that needs to be explored. In such an environment, it cannot be expected that the mixed method provides a perfect methodological approach to addressing the research questions because pragmatism itself favours being practical rather than perfect (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). A lack of skills, time, and financial resources required to conduct a mixed-method study also poses challenges to researchers when using a mixed-method approach (Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2012). Due to these reasons, mixed-method research is still falling behind compared to quantitative and qualitative methods. Furthermore, criticisms against methodological rigour and journal acceptance have made mixed methods less popular among scholars (Dy and Agwunobi, 2019). Moreover, it is evident that in practice, most mixed-methods research studies are far from generating meta-inferences, even though developing meta-inferences through integrating the outcomes from both quantitative and qualitative strands is recognised as a foremost priority of mixed-methods research (Venkatesh, Brown and Bala, 2013). Thus, it is apparent that researchers adopting mixed-methods approaches should be clear about the purpose of conducting such approaches, as they involve extra complexities and require more skills and resources that need to be justified.

Despite the inherent limitations, the mixed-methods approach has recently gained popularity as a balanced approach that provides stronger inferences, capitalising on the advantages of both qualitative and quantitative approaches while offsetting their limitations. A review of the extant literature about the studies conducted using the mixed-method approach showcases that scholars have used this approach for various purposes. Table 4.1 below illustrates some commonly agreed purposes for conducting mixed-method research.

Table 4.1 Purposes of Conducting Mixed Methods Research

Purpose	Description	Source
Triangulation	Comparing and corroborating findings derived from different methodological approaches to enhance the academic rigour and credibility of the research findings.	(Greene, Caracelli and Graham, 1989; Bryman, 2006; Doyle, Brady and Byrne, 2009; Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2012; Venkatesh, Brown and Bala, 2013)
Complementarity	Using the findings generated from adopting one research method to enhance, explain, or provide further clarification to the research findings generated through another methodological approach.	
Development	Implementing methods sequentially to use the findings of one method towards developing the other method (for example, findings derived from analysing interviews can be used to develop measures).	
Expansion/Different research questions	Adopting diverse methodological approaches for different research questions to explore various components based on the most appropriate method applicable for exploring those questions.	
Offset	Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to offset weaknesses of one approach from the other.	(Bryman, 2006; Doyle, Brady and Byrne, 2009; Venkatesh, Brown and Sullivan, 2016)
Completeness	Both qualitative and quantitative approaches are being employed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the area of enquiry.	
Initiation	Interrogating the reasons and rationale behind contradictions in findings related to one method in	(Greene, Caracelli and Graham, 1989)

	comparison to another may help develop new perspectives on the phenomenon.	
Confirm and discover	Integrating two methodological approaches to develop and test a theory within a single study.	(Bryman, 2006; Doyle, Brady and Byrne, 2009)
Diversity of views	Integrating the perspectives of researchers and participants through diverse methodological approaches.	(Bryman, 2006; Venkatesh, Brown and Bala, 2013)

4.3.2 Justification for Using the Mixed Method Approach

As numerous aspects, including gender, entrepreneurship, information technology, and context, become intertwined and interact, FDE emerges as a multifaceted and intricate area of research. Given the complexity inherent in this research domain, valuable insights are expected to be gained through a mixed-methods approach rather than relying solely on a monomethod approach (Derera, Chitakunye and O'Neill, 2014). Although the mixed method has the potential to provide substantial robustness to studies on FDE, a complex phenomenon, there is currently no evidence of its application in the field of FDE, which can be identified as a lacuna in the area. Existing literature emphasises that the novel research area of FDE is dominated by qualitative methods, where there is a lack of methodological diversity (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024).

While researchers have utilised the mixed methods approach due to diverse reasons (Bryman, 2006; Harrison, 2013; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004), in this study, the foremost reasons for using the mixed methods can be recognised as completeness, complementarity, to address different research questions and to offset the weaknesses of adopting monomethod. From the outset, the study's aim aligns well with the rationale of completeness, as it calls for a broader and holistic understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE in the Sri Lankan context. FDE is a complex, context-bound phenomenon shaped by complex individual and social ascriptions; therefore, it is imperative to adopt a mixed-methodology approach, as it serves the purpose of

completeness. Furthermore, adopting a mixed-method approach in this study serves the purpose of complementarity. The researcher used the findings from the informal interviews with key stakeholders to enhance the survey and in-depth interviews to dive deep into the findings derived from the quantitative approach. In addition, using mixed methods in this study enables the researcher to select the most suitable combination of methods that best addresses the various research questions (Harrison, 2013; Eliakis *et al.*, 2020). In response to calls from Trauth and Connolly (2021) to move beyond merely identifying static factors influencing women's engagement in IT related careers and explore how and why these factors affect women's participation in IT careers, the first two research questions that focused on exploring the factors impacting women's engagement in DE and the social ascriptions that determine intersectional differences addressed through both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Addressing the third research question solely through a qualitative approach allowed for effective inferences based on the respondents' described experiences while maintaining the parsimony of the study (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2006; Venkatesh, Brown and Bala, 2013). Overall, to ensure the research objectives of the study are effectively met while maintaining the parsimony of the study, the first two research questions were addressed through quantitative research, followed by qualitative research and the third question was addressed only through a qualitative approach (See Figure 4.2). In addition, it is apparent that using the mixed method in this study enabled offsetting the disadvantages of each approach and leveraging the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research. Context-free generalisation pursued by the quantitative approach (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004) fails to understand FDE as a context-bound phenomena. The inherent subjectivity and limited generalisability associated with the qualitative approach can be perceived as potential limitations that may diminish qualitative research's broader applicability and value (Venkatesh, Brown and Sullivan, 2016). Thus, mixed-method research related to the area helped to alleviate the limitations of mono-method and glean a broader understanding of the field.

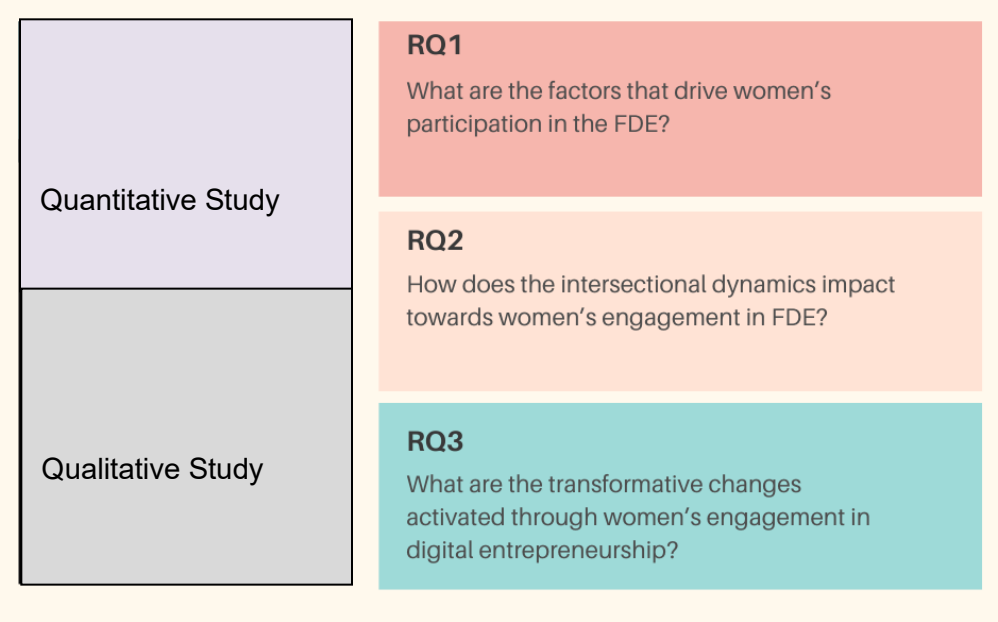

Figure 4.2 Research Questions Addressed through Different Methods

4.4 Research Design

The process of crafting research designs in mixed-method studies significantly differs from that of single-strand studies. It involves integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to effectively address research questions and achieve the study's objectives (Harrison, 2013). Pragmatism is a philosophical stance that emphasises the practicality and utility of an approach or methodology; therefore, it values the use of research designs and methods in a practical manner that is most effective in achieving the study's goals and addressing the research questions without strict adherence to a single philosophical or methodological framework (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Pragmatism encourages researchers to strategically combine qualitative and quantitative methods, providing viable justifications to achieve the most practical outcomes. Aligning with the philosophical stance of pragmatism, once the researcher made an informed decision about the appropriateness of the mixed methodology approach (Venkatesh, Brown and Sullivan, 2016), then the researcher has to make research design decisions that would enable addressing the research questions in an effective manner (Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2012; Venkatesh,

Brown and Sullivan, 2016). Even though the viability of a mixed-method approach to offset the limitations of relying on the monomethod has been explicitly discussed recently, inadequate explanations have been provided in terms of how to conduct mixed-method research (Morgan, 1998; Venkatesh, Brown and Bala, 2013; Venkatesh, Brown and Sullivan, 2016; Fox and Connolly, 2018). As the definition of mixed-methods research calls for combining elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches in a practical way to address research questions, it encompasses a broader range of possible combinations used by researchers for different research studies. Thus, the research design in mixed-method research is dynamic as it comprises a distinct combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Due to this dynamic nature of the mixed method studies, in many instances, mixed method studies are criticised for insufficient articulation of the research method. To sidestep from this past criticism, this study relied on the Good Reporting of a Mixed Methods Study (GRAMMS) method outlined by O'Cathain, Murphy and Nicholl (2008). Previous scholars have substantiated the appropriateness of explaining research design with the GRAMMS method in complex IS studies (Kenny and Connolly, 2016; Fox and Connolly, 2018). Figure 4.3 below illustrates the GRAMMS guidelines (O'Cathain, Murphy and Nicholl, 2008). The research design adopted for this study was explained in light of the GRAMMS's guidelines in the next section.

(1) Describe the justification for using a mixed methods approach to the research question
(2) Describe the design in terms of the purpose, priority, and sequence of methods
(3) Describe each method in terms of sampling, data collection and analysis
(4) Describe where integration has occurred, how it has occurred and who has participated in it
(5) Describe any limitation of one method associated with the present of the other method
(6) Describe any insights gained from mixing or integrating methods

Figure 4.3 Checklist of GRAMMS

Based on the GRAMMS, it is required to justify adopting the mixed methods approach to address the research questions, which is explained in section 4.3.2.

4.5 Priority and Sequence of Studies

Decisions on which method to give priority to and the sequencing of the methods are recognised as two pivotal decisions related to mixed-methods research (Greene, Caracelli and Graham, 1989; Morgan, 1998). Based on the GRAMMS guidelines, once the decision is made to conduct a mixed-method study, the subsequent research design decision should be on whether the qualitative or the quantitative approach should be used as the principal method for data collection for the project (Morgan, 1998). The research related to feminism predominantly recognises the appropriateness of the qualitative approach as it enables an in-depth understanding related to broader experiences, phenomena and embedded context (Clarke and Braun, 2019; Marlow, Hicks and Treanor, 2019). Therefore, this study used the qualitative approach as the principal method and the quantitative method as the complementary method. While the quantitative study focused only on exploring the wide array of change factors that drive women to engage in FDE, the qualitative study focused on both these factors and how their engagement in FDE activates social change to attain a holistic understanding of FDE's emancipatory potential.

In mixed-method designs, the sequence refers to the order in which researchers employ the two data strands (Harrison, 2013). Regarding the sequencing decision of the study, mixed-method research can take two forms: sequential and concurrent (Venkatesh, Brown and Sullivan, 2016). In the sequential study approach, researchers conduct one strand of study before the other strand, and in the concurrent approach, both qualitative and quantitative strands are performed simultaneously. Due to the practical limitations of using the concurrent approach, including difficulties in managing two different field efforts concurrently and coordinating learnings from both approaches, the sequential mixed-method is recognised as the more practically viable strategy (Morgan, 1998). In the sequential mixed method, the order in which qualitative and quantitative study strands are conducted will be determined based on the research questions and the objectives.

This study encompasses two primary spheres of emancipation: the factors that drive women to engage in digital entrepreneurship and whether women can facilitate social

transformation through their new role as female digital entrepreneurs. It is worthwhile to note that even though the study comprised three data collection stages, stage one - preliminary informal interviews was conducted to understand how FDE takes place at the grassroots level of the Sri Lankan context. This stage was independent of the main study, as this preliminary exploration aimed to understand the practice of FDE in Sri Lanka and possible challenges that may arise when conducting the study. Further, these preliminary interviews facilitated the development of the network, which was imperative to gain access to female digital entrepreneurs who comprise a difficult-to-reach audience due to the scarcity. The main study comprised two stages. First, a quantitative study employing a deductive approach was used to test hypotheses about the change factors affecting women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship. Based on the findings of the quantitative study, a principal qualitative study was conducted to gain comprehensive and in-depth insights into why and how these factors influence women's participation in FDE and whether women activate social transformation through their involvement as female digital entrepreneurs. Therefore, based on the three types of the sequential mixed method proposed by Creswell (2003), namely (1) sequential explanatory, (2) sequential exploratory, and (3) sequential transformative, this study can be identified as a sequential explanatory study which is characterised by initial quantitative phase followed by the qualitative phase. Figure 4.4 below showcases the stages of the overall study and illustrate how the findings of one level of the research design informed the design and implementation of the next stage of data collection more precisely

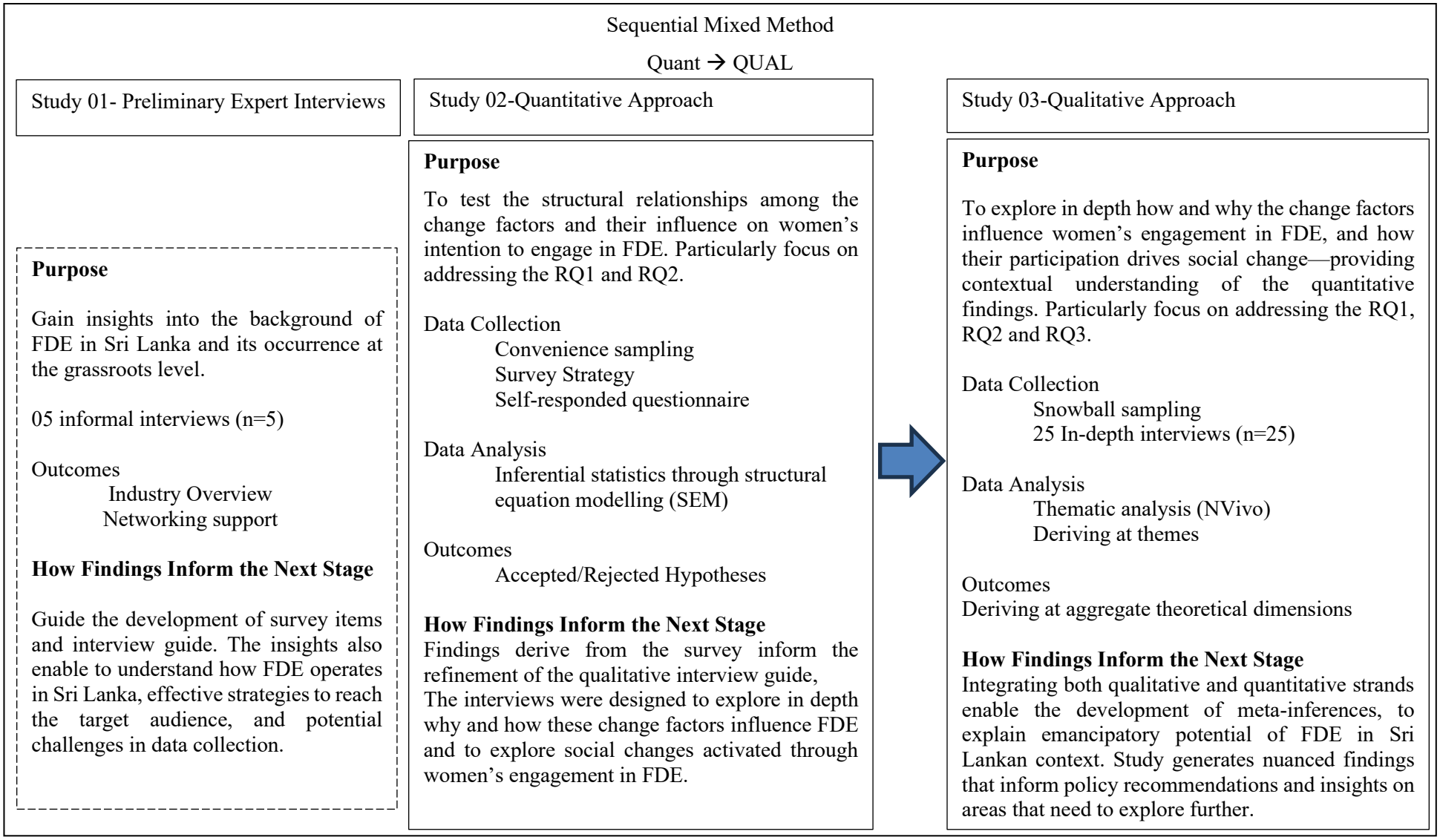

Figure 4.4 Overall Research Design

4.6. Research Site

4.6.1 Female Entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is one of the South Asian countries where women constitute more than half of its population, yet have very low labour force participation (UN Women, 2022). Women's labour force participation has not shown a significant growth over the years, remaining between 34%-37% from 2007 to 2014 (International Labour Organization, 2016). Replicating the situation in South Asia, postcolonial neoliberalism ethos and deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms result in the marginalisation of women and confine their participation in economic activities (Ranasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2021). Although the Sri Lankan economy is primarily driven by sole-owned businesses, which account for 90% of all businesses, female entrepreneurial enterprises comprise only 25% of the total (Sri Lanka Export Development Board, 2019).

Government agencies, as well as international organisations, have recognised entrepreneurship as a potential and viable economic activity for women in Sri Lanka (Secretariat for Senior Ministers, 2012; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022). For example, the International Labour Organisation (2016) emphasised that female entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in Sri Lanka. One of the main reasons why female entrepreneurship is important for Sri Lankan women is because it gives them economic independence and encourages them to participate in the national economy. Their contributions to the national economy, in turn, will enable Sri Lanka to become an "Upper Middle Income" nation because businesses run by women have a higher potential to cater to the emerging needs of the rising middle class. Another reason scholars highlight is the ability of entrepreneurial ventures to facilitate greater work-life balance for women. It is observed that since women can make flexible work arrangements to suit their schedules (Otobe, 2013; International Labour Organization, 2016; Surangi, 2018; Kodagoda and Samaratunge, 2023), running their own businesses allows them to achieve economic stability while fulfilling their familial and caregiving responsibilities.

Sri Lanka differs from other South Asian countries in terms of contextual conditions and has attained better gender parity than its neighbouring countries in the region. Comparatively, Sri Lankan women's education, health, and financial literacy are higher than those of other countries (United Nations ESCAP, 2015). Therefore, it is surprising that this marginalisation and deprivation of opportunities for women still persist in the country. Hence, the need for serious academic and policy-level attention on this issue has been widely acknowledged (Wickramasinghe and Jayatilaka, 2006; Otobe, 2013; Banu, 2016). For instance, the ongoing economic crisis has a detrimental impact on the economic and social well-being of Sri Lankan citizens. The Sri Lankan economy has shown signs of disruption over the last five years due to weak policy initiatives and political fluidity. However, the current financial crisis has exacerbated the situation, particularly in terms of balance of payment crises and mounting debt amounts (Liang, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022; World Bank, 2023). The economic downturn affected all citizens, but its adversity towards already marginalised people, including women, is expected to be more pronounced. For example, research has shown that women often encounter unique challenges during crisis situations, such as the Venezuelan economic crisis (John, 2019), the Tsunami in 2011 in Japan (Pongponrat and Ishii, 2018), and the crisis induced by the COVID-19 Pandemic (Madgavkar, 2020). Sri Lanka is no exception to this because Sri Lankan women are experiencing a significant worsening of their financial situation at present, which has far-reaching negative consequences (Gunatilaka and Chandrasiri, 2022). Therefore, with women comprising 52.1% of the country's population, it is essential to enhance their economic contributions if the country is to overcome the financial crisis. Female entrepreneurship is especially important during times of economic crisis. For instance, scholars have identified that necessity-driven entrepreneurship among women has gained prominence in crisis contexts due to its potential to counter adversities related to survival, unemployment, and sudden layoffs from jobs (Pines, Lerner and Schwartz, 2010; Vossenberg, 2013; Elam et al., 2021). Given the unique contextual conditions of Sri Lanka, greater scholarly focus on exploring women's entrepreneurship in the country is warranted.

4.6.2 Previous Studies on Female Entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka

Entrepreneurship is recognised as a viable economic activity for Sri Lankan women who are marginalised by socio-cultural norms, institutional practices, and the economic conditions in the country. Yet, there is a lack of studies on female entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka (Ranasinghe, 2008; Surangi, 2018; Kodagoda and Samaratunge, 2023) (See Appendix H for a tabulation of empirical studies on female entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka).

Available studies on female entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka mainly revolve around the challenges experienced by women entrepreneurs in terms of initiating and sustaining their entrepreneurial businesses (Surangi, 2018; Adikaram and Razik, 2023; Kodagoda and Samaratunge, 2023). These studies identified a set of barriers, including limited family and social support, insufficient financial capital, restricted networking opportunities, low self-confidence, and reduced self-efficacy. These challenges are further intensified because women are expected to fulfill traditional duties of wives and mothers along with career commitments (Hewamanne, 2020; De Silva *et al.*, 2021; Surangi, 2022; Adikaram and Razik, 2023). Furthermore, findings recognise the influence exerted by the household and family over the success of the female entrepreneurial journey (Ranasinghe, 2008; Hewamanne, 2020; Surangi, 2022; Adikaram and Razik, 2023). Sri Lankan women often prioritise family commitments due to societal norms and expectations. Consequently, they tend to choose business ventures that offer flexible working arrangements, allowing them to balance their roles as mothers and homemakers. This is identified as the primary reason why women in Sri Lanka choose entrepreneurship (Hewamanne, 2020; De Silva *et al.*, 2021; Surangi, 2022; Adikaram and Razik, 2023; Kodagoda and Samaratunge, 2023). Another key reason is that entrepreneurial ventures allow these women to provide a complementary income for their families and to invest in their children's future (Surangi, 2018; De Silva *et al.*, 2021; Kodagoda and Samaratunge, 2023). However, Ahl (2006) points out that the impression that entrepreneurship will help women achieve a better work-life balance is a fallacy. Although most women choose entrepreneurship because they think it will enable them to strike a better work-life balance, she observes that in reality, this will only reinforce patriarchal gender norms, as women will not receive any relief from familial and household duties (Ahl, 2006). She further claims that

celebrating women's success as entrepreneurs is based on how they manage household responsibilities alongside their businesses. Such multitasking is often done at the expense of women's well-being (Ahl, 2006), and provides no real emancipation for women.

Evidently, the existing literature has identified the barriers that female entrepreneurs face in Sri Lanka. These studies provide valuable insights into the phenomenon; however, future research must extend beyond merely identifying barriers. Rather than taking a linear or singular approach, research should follow a more nuanced approach. For example, scholars need to explore the factors that encourage women to pursue entrepreneurship ventures while successfully overcoming gender-specific barriers. Moreover, it is topical to examine how these entrepreneurial efforts allow women to renegotiate traditional gender roles that are deeply entrenched in society and contribute to changing social structures.

4.6.3 Digital Entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka

Recognising the pivotal role of digitalisation as a primary catalyst for development, Sri Lanka, like other developing nations, has initiated efforts to accelerate the growth of digital businesses and foster a range of disruptive innovations. This strategic focus on digital transformation reflects a broader global trend of harnessing technology to drive economic development and enhance competitiveness in a rapidly growing digital economy. However, it is apparent that, like most other developing nations, Sri Lanka struggles to keep up with the fast pace of digital transformation. Therefore, the country is presumed to be at the early stage of the digital revolution (Bustis, Ganesan and Herath, 2018). Although Sri Lanka's progress towards digitalisation has not been smooth or rapid, it has achieved satisfactory growth over the years, and currently, the ICT-driven sector is the fourth-largest source of export earnings (U.S. International Trade Administration, 2023). The progressive policy initiatives taken in the mid-1990s made Sri Lanka the first South Asian economy to liberalise the telecommunication sector (Wattegama, 2021). Early private sector involvement, through investments in the telecommunications sector, played a significant role in the growth and adoption of new technology (Gunawardene, 2017). Moreover, the recent COVID-19 outbreak significantly accelerated digital transformation on a

global scale, and businesses in Sri Lanka embraced this shift, too. With COVID-19, digital technology adoption was no longer an option but the only means of survival in the "new normal" conditions. Even businesses that had not reached digital maturity or those with low expectations of going digital any time soon at the time of the pandemic were compelled to adopt digital technologies because of this (Hemachandra & Sharkasi, 2021).

By the beginning of 2022, Internet penetration in Sri Lanka was at 52.6%, which marked a rise of +4.9 % between 2021 and 2022. This was mainly due to the pandemic-induced Internet adoption (Kemp, 2021). According to the ICT development index, which assesses the ICT progression in countries under three main blocks: access, use and skills, Sri Lanka is in the 117th position in the world, and within the South Asian region, it is in the 2nd place (International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 2021). Furthermore, the usage of mobile phones in the country is at a very high level, where mobile connections in the country account for 149.9% of the population (Kemp, 2021). Even though the exact figures cannot be found in terms of smartphone usage in the country, smartphones are recognised as instrumental in the spread of internet usage. For example, in the year 2017, nearly 75% of the internet users in the country used mobile phones to get connected to the Internet (Gunawardene, 2017). This is common in developing countries because in many emerging economies, people tend to bypass computers and laptops, which are more expensive, and adopt smartphones due to their affordability (Kim et al., 2021).

Global companies are increasingly adopting new strategies focusing on their core functions while outsourcing non-essential tasks to low-cost service providers worldwide. This trend, supported by advancements in digital technologies, significantly contributes to the growth of the ICT sector in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has been successful as a viable destination for Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) and Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO). Winning the Delivery Destination Award for 2019 awarded by the Global Sourcing Association (GSA)-UK (SLASSCOM, 2019) is a case in point. Thus, the future of Sri Lanka's digital transformation looks promising, and this transformation is likely to promote digital businesses in Sri Lanka further.

Research shows that the IT and IT-enabled services sector are vital in promoting entrepreneurship among Sri Lankan youth because these sectors form an important catalyst, encouraging innovative thinking and providing opportunities for young entrepreneurs to thrive (SLASSCOM, 2019; Wattegama, 2021; Sachitra and Chinthaka, 2022). Realising the potential of digital entrepreneurship, the country's pioneering institutions pledged to augment digital technologies, including government agencies, non-governmental institutions, the corporate sector, and individuals. They started working towards creating a more conducive environment for digital entrepreneurs in the country (Wattegama, 2021). The role of the digital entrepreneurial ecosystem DEE[1] is a complex combination of an array of elements in the region which creates a conducive atmosphere for augmenting innovative start-ups with the aid of digital technologies (Du et al., 2018) (DEE) is vital in augmenting digital business start-ups in Sri Lanka. Hence, great effort has been taken to establish a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem, which creates a favourable environment for digital innovations and startups (Gunawardene, 2017; SLASSCOM, 2019; Wattegama, 2021). In the year 2019, for example, SLASSCOM announced a 400% increase in the startup ecosystem value over the past two years, which marked an exponential rise from LKR 5.4 Bn to LKR 21.8 Bn. This brought recognition to Sri Lanka as the second-best country for affordable talent in the Asia Pacific region (SLASSCOM, 2019). Realising the significance of female digital entrepreneurs and women-led tech start-ups, the Sri Lankan government and corporate sector have taken many progressive initiatives to support female digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka. For instance, SLASSCOM has recently initiated the Women Technopreneurs Forum to promote digital entrepreneurship among women in the country (SLASSCOM, 2019). Furthermore, several flagship programmes related to education, awareness development, training, and skills development of women have been introduced to enhance female participation in digital technologies (SLASSCOM, 2019; Wattegama, 2021). Other progressive initiatives to uplift digital technology-related skills among the youth include promoting ICT education in schools by introducing ICT as a subject; increasing the number of ICT-related degree programmes in universities; restructuring the extant infrastructure to offer ICT programmes which specifically target re-skilling and up-skilling the marginalised youth in the country such as youth in the estate

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DEE is a complex combination of an array of elements in the region which creates a conducive atmosphere for augmenting innovative start-ups with the aid of digital technologies (Du et al., 2018)

sector, students in remote areas and school drop outs (Wattegama, 2021; Sri Lanka Export Development Board, 2017). Such initiatives are imperative to bridge the gap in terms of unequal access and exposure to ICT experienced by rural or marginalised communities in the country. Moreover, the Sri Lankan government has taken steps to introduce entrepreneurship as an academic subject in secondary education (National Institution of Education Sri Lanka, 2014). This intervention can encourage the students to pursue businesses and equip them with the necessary skills for becoming entrepreneurs.

By the year 2022, there were over 600 digital startups island-wide that were listed on www.startupsl.lk, the premier startup platform in Sri Lanka (ICTA Startup SL, 2022). When evaluating the profiles of these tech startups, it is apparent that most of them are engaged in e-commerce services and digital marketing. At the same time, the other businesses are mainly related to artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), Fintech, Edutech, and Agtech (Startup SL, 2022). Surprisingly, regardless of the promising initiatives proposed and taken up at the corporate and policy levels, there are many unique challenges related to the industry that form barriers to realising the full potential of digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka. Therefore, efforts should be made to explore the factors that adversely affect the journey of a digital entrepreneur vis-a-vis the contextual conditions in Sri Lanka.

4.5.4 Female Digital Entrepreneurship (FDE) in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, women have achieved greater gender parity compared to neighbouring South Asian countries (Banu, 2016b). Sri Lankan women enjoy considerable autonomy in areas such as education, health, and economic participation, which has significantly contributed to their overall well-being and societal development. In fact, there is a strong foundation to build upon as constant efforts are made to enhance women's roles across various sectors. Amidst the structural obstructions and deep-rooted societal norms which perpetuate gender-based discrimination, the country has marked significant progress in terms of gender parity. For example, Sri Lanka produced the first female prime minister in the world in 1960 (Ganesan & Herath, 2019).

In terms of population, too, there are more women than men in Sri Lanka. Out of the total population, women account for 52%, (Department of Census and Statistics, 2025). Even though women's involvement in the economic sector is largely confined to lower-level jobs (Perera, Ganeshan and Belitski, 2021), their active participation in higher-order positions in organisations and their contribution as entrepreneurs are also being recognised as pivotal to the national economy and society at large. Furthermore, women's involvement in the ICT sector is also recognised as pivotal to the country's development because, at present, the ICT industry has become the backbone of contemporary economic development (SLASSCOM and International Finance Corporation, 2021). When considering female workforce participation in the ICT sector, it is evident that women have achieved considerable progress. For example, the number of women in ICT continues to grow each year, and currently, there are 34% of women in the total ICT workforce (Institute of Policy Studies Sri Lanka, 2025). Gender parity in Sri Lankan education has enabled women to pursue higher studies in the STEM disciplines. The most recent data shows that female undergraduate enrollment in State Universities' STEM programmes accounted for 49% of total enrollments (Abayasekara, 2020). Conversely, the gender gap in the startup sector is broader, where 87% of the tech startups are male-led (SLASSCOM, 2019). Thus, although gender parity in education has been achieved in Sri Lanka, women's participation as digital entrepreneurs remains relatively low.

According to a report by SLASSCOM and the International Finance Corporation (2021), women engaged in digital entrepreneurship constitute merely 2.1% of the total female workforce participation in the country. This indicates that Sri Lanka is yet to realise the potential of digital entrepreneurship fully and that there are various challenges to this (SLASSCOM, 2019; DAI Global, LLC, 2021; Wattegama, 2021; Sachitra and Chinthaka, 2022). For instance, the overlapping relationship among entrepreneurship, gender, and digital technology fields creates a double-gender bind for women in digital entrepreneurship, as both entrepreneurship and the digital field are perceived as masculine domains that are not appropriate for women (Adikaram and Razik, 2023; Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; Luo and Chan, 2021). Thus, the pathway for Sri Lankan women towards digital entrepreneurship is challenging. Moreover, the lack of financial resources also discourages women from pursuing ICT entrepreneurial ventures. Most women's financial

capital primarily comes from personal savings and support from their families (SLASSCOM and International Finance Corporation, 2021), which is generally insufficient for investing in entrepreneurial ventures. Additionally, it has been found that female digital entrepreneurs face significant deficiencies in mentorship, role models, and support for legal and intellectual property protection (Adikaram and Razik, 2023). They also have less access to training and skill development programmes than their male counterparts. This disparity arises because digital entrepreneurship is often perceived as a predominantly male profession, discouraging women's participation (SLASSCOM & International Finance Corporation, 2021).

Although academic attention towards FDE is on the rise, it is still not enough to gain a holistic understanding of FDE in the Sri Lankan context (De Silva *et al.*, 2021; De Silva, 2022; Adikaram and Razik, 2023). Therefore, further research is essential to attain a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDEs.

4.5.5 Sri Lanka as the Research Site

The Sri Lankan context can be considered a viable empirical site for various reasons. Sri Lanka, an economically challenged developing nation in South Asia, has experienced many precarious economic conditions over the years (World Bank, 2023). These events have negatively impacted its citizens. Following nearly three decades of civil war and the 2004 tsunami, the country experienced a brief economic recovery after the war ended in 2009 (Banu, 2016). However, this recovery was short-lived due to subsequent crises, including the 2019 Easter terrorist attack, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing economic crisis, now deemed the worst in Sri Lanka's history (World Bank, 2023; Liang, 2022). These challenges have severely affected the entire population, with marginalised groups, especially women, facing even more significant hardships (Pines, Lerner and Schwartz, 2010; Pongponrat and Ishii, 2018; Madgavkar *et al.*, 2020). However, when compared to the neighbouring South Asian countries, Sri Lanka attained better recognition in terms of gender parity, where women’s education, health, and financial literacy remain at a higher level (Fernando and Cohen, 2013; Kangas, Haider and Fraser, 2014; United Nations ESCAP, 2015). This can be mainly due to the country’s reliance on Buddhist doctrine, which advocates the equality of all beings regardless of gender, caste, and ethnicity (Fernando and Cohen,

2013; Franzke *et al.*, 2022). Despite the country's political instability and economic turmoil, the digital technology landscape has also marked considerable progress in recent years. This progression is mostly on par with other South Asian countries, even though it is far from attaining a foothold similar to giant Asian economies like China and India (Wattegama, 2021). At the policy level, too, ICT/BPM sector is being recognised as the way forward for Sri Lanka, where emphasis is given to unlocking the potential of the ICT sector in the country (SLASSCOM, 2019).

When considering women in the ICT sector, despite the deeply entrenched patriarchal gender norms and strong association of ICT as a male domain, it is surprising to see the remarkable gender parity in the ICT education field in the country. Based on the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka, out of the STEM graduates produced by the national universities, 55% accounts for girls (Adikaram & Razik, 2023), instilling optimism about women's future in the digital economy. However, despite satisfactory progress related to gender equality in the context of Sri Lankan education, marginalisation and deprivation of women still persist, which requires attention from academic and policy levels (Wickramasinghe and Jayatilaka, 2006; Banu, 2016; International Labour Organization, 2016). Especially considering the gender parity achieved in STEM education, Sri Lankan women's involvement in STEM entrepreneurship remains underutilised and warrants considerable academic and policy-level attention (SLASSCOM & International Finance Corporation, 2021; Adikaram and Razik, 2023). Based on the SLASSCOM & International Finance Corporation (2021), women technopreneurs in Sri Lanka account for only 2.1% of the total technopreneurs in the country. Thus, when considering the overall situation of Sri Lanka, it can be considered a land of aspirations and struggles for female digital entrepreneurs, which simultaneously offers both favourable and unfavourable conditions. Regardless of the disparate context in the country, which makes it an ideal empirical site to study FDE, there is very limited academic attention being paid to FDE in Sri Lanka (De Silva *et al.*, 2021). Adikaram and Razik (2023), for instance, have conducted a study on unique barriers for female entrepreneurs in the STEM field due to double-gender bind and their findings show that the lack of networking opportunities, procedural obstacles, obtaining resources, lack of social recognition and managing work-life balance as the predominant challenges for female entrepreneurs in the field of STEM. Therefore, to date, no studies have been conducted specifically on the emancipatory potential

offered by FDE in Sri Lanka. Therefore, conducting further research on FDE in Sri Lanka to bridge the identified research gaps would be crucial for advancing knowledge in this specific area.

4.7 Sampling, Data Collection and Analysis

For the Phase1-preliminary informal interviews the industry experts were selected based on purposive sampling, and to identify the experts, the researcher used her personal network. Interviews were informal and conducted through Zoom and telephone, based on the preferences of the interviewees. Phase 2 was a quantitative study in which a survey was conducted by disseminating an online questionnaire to collect data. Data was analysed using statistical techniques to test hypotheses. As Phase 3 qualitative study was conducted, where data were collected through in-depth interviews. The researcher relied on the thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyse the data.

4.7.1 Sampling Procedure

Sampling in a mixed-method study offers a greater challenge than sampling in a mono-method study as it requires samples to be selected for both qualitative and quantitative strands, which serve different purposes. In a mixed-method study, to strike a balance between generalizability and exploring in-depth individual experiences, the qualitative research must have a purposeful sampling strategy, and the quantitative phase should have much broader, focused probability sampling (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). Despite the recommendation to use random sampling for quantitative research to alleviate researcher bias and make it more conducive to generalising the findings to the population (Topp, Barker and Degenhardt, 2004) in this study for both qualitative and quantitative phases, the participants were selected through purposive sampling. Even though purposive sampling is traditionally associated with qualitative studies, it is evident that it is used substantially in quantitative and mixed-method research (Kemper, Stringfield and Teddlie, 2003).

Despite commending random sampling techniques as the most effective quantitative approach, scholars have emphasised the suitability of purposive sampling with both qualitative and quantitative research techniques (Tongco, 2007). In this study, implementing a randomised

sampling technique was not feasible due to the unavailability of a sampling frame (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2014; Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). It was impossible to find any reliable source of information that could serve as a sampling frame due to the unavailability of reliable statistics related to entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka. Substantiating the unavailability of databases of female digital entrepreneurs, at the preliminary expert interviews, Maheshi stated that *"...we have lot more things to do...we don't have much statistical figures pertaining to the digital entrepreneurship and to be frank, we are not engaging in any project to develop such database in the near future".* To obtain the closest approximation related to the population of female digital entrepreneurs in the country, the researcher used the SLASSCOM report (2019), which claims that males dominate 87% of startups in the country. This is based only on the 778 startups registered with www.startupsl.lk, Sri Lanka's national online platform for digital business startups. However, when asked about these statistics during the expert interviews, one respondent informed that many of the digital businesses operating at the grassroots level are not registered with this platform, and many are not even aware of the availability of such a platform. Furthermore, registrations at www.startupsl.lk are not only limited to established entrepreneurs with a sustainable business where; it is an open platform even for potential digital entrepreneurs as well as freelancers (ICTA, 2020). Thus, it was difficult to get a complete list of the population of female digital entrepreneurs in the country who could serve as a sampling frame for the probability sampling.

The unit of analysis for this study was the female digital entrepreneur in Sri Lanka, and the following criteria were used to identify the study participants through purposive sampling. Appreciating the heterogeneity among digital businesses, any female entrepreneur who has digitised some or all of her business was recognised as a female digital entrepreneur. As FDE is a context-embedded phenomenon (Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020), the study will predominantly focus on female digital entrepreneurs residing in Sri Lanka. The data collection took place during a period when the country experienced a high level of migration due to the economic crisis (economynext.com, 2023). This situation was also common for female digital entrepreneurs, and many of them have relocated out of the country, even though the business initiatives they started are still operating within the country. As this segment's unique experience is beyond the scope of the study, the researcher predominantly relied on the experiences of female

digital entrepreneurs residing in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, only female digital entrepreneurs with more than two years of experience and who were currently running their businesses were considered for the study. This was done to ensure that the study captures the experience of female digital entrepreneurs who are making an effort to sustain their businesses because previous scholars have emphasised that women are "getting in" to entrepreneurship but not "getting on", especially in the economic crises (Malach, Lerner and Schwartz, 2010).

Overall, the researcher has taken conscious efforts to ensure that sample broadly represents the average Sri Lankan woman in digital entrepreneurship in terms of demographic characteristics. Although existing studies on FDE in Sri Lanka are limited, and the concept itself remains loosely defined, this study adopted a working definition that aligns closely with SLASSCOM's characterization of a woman technopreneur. According to SLASSCOM, a technopreneur is "*an entrepreneur who leverages technology to transform traditional or orthodox business practices, rather than someone who necessarily comes from a technology background*" IFC and SLASSCOM (2021). This interpretation guided the selection of the sample and the identification of female digital entrepreneurs for the study. Based on IFC and SLASSCOM (2021), 82% of Sri Lankan digital entrepreneurs are under the age of 40. Consistent with this profile, 89% of the survey respondents and 85% of the interview participants in this study were below 45 years of age, indicating that the sample aligns well with the age distribution typical of the country's female digital entrepreneurs. In terms of education, the IFC and SLASSCOM report also notes that women tend to enter the sector at a higher educational level, often with undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications. This pattern was reflected in the current study, where 55% of respondents possessed a bachelor's degree or higher qualification. Overall, the sample thus represents a profile closely aligned with the typical female digital entrepreneur in Sri Lanka.

It is noteworthy that the philosophical stance of pragmatism emphasizes enhancing academic rigor, fostering deeper understanding, and addressing the research questions more effectively, rather than focusing solely on the pursuit of truth. In this study, the research questions center on the emancipatory processes of women who actively participate in female digital entrepreneurship (FDE). Accordingly, the researcher made an informed decision to focus

exclusively on successful female digital entrepreneurs, rather than including a comparative sample of non-digital or unsuccessful entrepreneurs. The primary aim of the study is not to contrast different entrepreneurial pathways, but to explore the factors that motivate women to engage in FDE and to drive social change through their participation. This focus enables the study to provide evidence-based recommendations for practice and policy. Including comparison groups would have broadened the scope beyond the study's objectives and weakened its central emphasis on successful female digital entrepreneurs. Therefore, influenced by the philosophical stance researcher relied solely on active female digital entrepreneurs without taking a comparative sample of non-digital or failed entrepreneurs. Furthermore, study did not explicitly take business registration status as a variable for the purpose of this study. This decision was informed by the contextual conditions in the Sri Lanka where a large proportion of female entrepreneurs operate in informal economy (Amarasooriya, Premarathna and Rajadurei, 2024). For many female digital entrepreneurs those engaged in digital and home-based ventures formality is fluid where they may be running businesses through online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or WhatsApp yet may be unregistered. Therefore, demarcation between formal and informal entrepreneurs was not considered as a critical aspect of this study. Against this backdrop it should be noted that, although the study's conclusions are based on the experiences of female digital entrepreneurs regardless of their registration status, findings are more skewed towards those operating within the informal or semi-formal sectors. However, in future research could build on this by incorporating business registration status as a moderating variable to examine whether formality influences the experiences of female digital entrepreneurs.

4.7.1.1 Stage 2: Recruitment for the Survey

This section explains the strategies used by the researcher to recruit survey respondents. Due to the unavailability of a sampling frame and the practical difficulties associated with having a limited number of female digital entrepreneurs in the country, the researcher recruited participants using convenience sampling. Even the handful of quantitative studies on FDE that have been undertaken previously relied on convenience sampling due to the paucity of female digital entrepreneurs (Molina-López *et al.*, 2021; Shukla *et al.*, 2021). The researcher employed all possible methods to ensure a high response rate, as she had to address the inherent low response

rate associated with the survey strategy and the scarcity of female digital entrepreneurs. Social support groups on Facebook, specifically those dedicated to empowering women and those supporting online ventures, were recognised as significant platforms for disseminating self-responded questionnaires. The researcher utilised contacts at SLASSCOM, ICTA, the Women's Chamber of Commerce, and Hatch, key institutions in the country that work with female digital entrepreneurs and disseminated the questionnaire through their respective databases. The researcher also established a personal network with key academics at institutions that offer professional qualifications in entrepreneurship, and the questionnaire was made available through their databases. In addition, Email, WhatsApp messages, and Facebook Messenger messages were directly sent to female digital entrepreneurs whom the researcher identified through her network.

As increasing the response rate was pivotal in the study, the researcher used various tactics to enhance the response rate. As proposed by Fan and Yan (2009), the researcher incorporated a declaration informing the respondents that they were among a small, carefully picked group to respond to the survey. Furthermore, the researcher utilised survey software that supports various browsers and devices. The questionnaire was developed in a mobile-friendly manner because, like in many other developing countries, including Sri Lanka, more people use smart mobile connections for internet access than computers (Pew Research Centre, 2015). Moreover, the researcher used Facebook posts and messages to emphasise the time constraints of data collection, which created a sense of urgency to collect data (Edwards, 2002; Fan and Yan, 2010). Through these strategies, the researcher made conscious efforts to enhance response rates. The discussion section elaborates on the researcher's reflections on the data collection.

Determining the sample size for a study is a complex decision that depends on a wide array of factors such as the approach of the research, the analytical method being used, the intricacy of the model and the number of variables, practical considerations such as time, resources etc., size of the sample related to similar studies, and data analysis (Memon *et al.*, 2020). While the general consensus favours larger sample sizes, academic scholars have recently argued that a large sample size may lead to a spurious relationship, even though two variables are not genuinely related (Kline, 2017; Hair *et al*., 2018). Furthermore, due to the novelty and paucity of FDE and the

unavailability of statistics related to female digital entrepreneurs in the country from a practical perspective, it was not feasible to go for an extremely large sample size. To determine the minimal sample size for this study, a power analysis was used (Delice, 2001; Hair *et al*., 2018; Memon *et al.*, 2020). G*Power version 3.1.9.7 software was used to perform a power analysis, and the calculation was done according to the sequential guidelines offered by Memon *et al.* (2020). Based on the power analysis, 143 units were determined to be the appropriate sample size for this study.

4.7.1.2 Stage 3: Recruitment for the Semi-Structured Interviews

Respondents in qualitative research play a decisive role as the qualitative research process involves attaining new knowledge as a co-creation between the researcher and participant (Leitch, Hill and Harrison, 2010; Dahal, 2023). This value co-creation process requires blurring boundaries between two parties and having a relationship with mutual trust (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009). Therefore, rigorously selecting participants and collecting data for qualitative research should be done (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Leitch, Hill and Harrison, 2010). Based on convenience sampling, the researcher identified potential interviewees. The personal networks developed during the expert interviews, the support of professional organisations and communities explicitly dealing with women entrepreneurs, and social networking sites were very useful in identifying and approaching potential participants. With the insights received at the expert interviews on potential challenges in data collection, the researcher started networking with key stakeholders who were related to the field before the data collection. The researcher identified potential respondents through these stakeholders and started developing a friendly relationship through initial phone conversations, Facebook interactions and LinkedIn messages. These unstructured, non-authoritative and informal communications created a conducive and intimate atmosphere, which is deemed useful for interviews where effectiveness depends on the extent to which participants are willing to share their experiences (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009).

To ensure that participants met the respondent selection criteria, during initial conversations, information was asked about the nature of the business, the number of years she has been running the business, and whether she presently resides in Sri Lanka. Respondents who

met all the criteria were identified as potential participants and invited to participate in an interview. To represent the heterogeneity in FDE in terms of technology usage and the impact of intersectionality towards emancipation, the researcher has made efforts to ensure as much heterogeneity amongst the respondents as possible. McAdam, Crowley and Harrison (2019) emphasised the importance of including a range of digital businesses to attain a comprehensive understanding of the broad potential of digital technologies in empowering women. The commonly held guiding principle in determining the sample size in qualitative research being the point of saturation (Morse, 2000; Hennink, Kaiser and Marconi, 2017); the researcher conducted the interviews until up to the point she did not hear anything new.

4.7.2 Conducting the Survey

The survey was conducted to test the causal relationships proposed in the refined conceptual framework. Due to practical reasons, including the paucity of female digital entrepreneurs and time constraints on the data collection process, one survey was used to measure both independent and dependent variables. The researcher was aware of the common method bias (CMB) problem due to using the same questionnaire and having the same respondents measure all the variables. As a result, she took various remedial actions to reduce the adverse effects of CMB, which is elaborated on later in the chapter. The researcher developed a self-respondent questionnaire to collect data. Since the latent constructs in the study cannot be measured directly, items were used, and ultimately, those were combined to measure the particular latent constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2021). Based on the refined conceptual framework, 15 latent constructs were identified, namely economic instability, attitude towards women, perceived formal institutional support, role models, family support, previous work experiences, digital self-efficacy, self-realisation, financial success, recognition, innovation, independence, fear of failure and digital entrepreneurial intention. Measures were adopted from previous studies to measure these latent constructs, and the study followed a five-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. Due to the first application of variables on FDE in the Sri Lankan context, rewording and amendments were required.

4.7.2.1 Survey Design and Pilot Testing

Survey design is a critical aspect of the research process, playing a pivotal role in collecting valuable data and generating meaningful insights. As a well-structured survey is the foundation upon which researchers build their investigations, it is essential to consider various elements such as question formulation, response options, and the overall flow of questions (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2014). Efforts were taken to ensure the crafting of clear and unbiased questions, the selection of appropriate response scales, and organising questions in a logical sequence. When developing the questions, meticulous attention was given, where the researcher ensured the adoption of well-established scales to ensure the data accuracy, reliability, and comparability with existing research, strengthening the scientific foundation (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2014; Sekeran and Bougie, 2014). The researcher opted for a five-point Likert scale, running from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree,' based on recommendations from Sachdev and Verma (2004). This choice is aimed at enhancing respondent satisfaction, increase response rates, and improve response quality. Survey items were rephrased to ensure that items align with this five-point Likert scale, as Hills and Argyle (2002) outlined. To rule out the potential adverse consequences of CMB, strategies proposed by MacKenzie *et al.* (2011) were applied during survey design. For instance, sections were separated for the endogenous and exogenous variables, ensuring that all items were unambiguous, notifying respondents that there were no right or wrong answers, incorporating marker variables and guaranteeing anonymity. As the language used in the questionnaire should approximate the level of understanding of the respondents (Sekeran and Bougie, 2014), the wording of the questions was done to align with the educational level of the audience. The questionnaire was made available in both English and Sinhala, where the English version was translated into Sinhala, Sri Lanka's primary language. Back translation was used to ensure the validity of the translation process (Brislin, 1970). As the researcher is a native speaker of Sinhala, she first translated the questionnaire from English to Sinhala. The translated version was given to a bilingual translator who was asked to translate it back into English. The researcher and the professional translator recognised discrepancies between the original and translated versions through a collaborative and iterative process, enabling consistency between the English and Sinhala versions.

The questionnaire was pilot-tested before commencing data collection. Pilot testing enabled the refinement of the questionnaire to make it more user-friendly and to obtain a substantial assessment of its validity (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2014). Expert opinions were gathered from a group of academic experts from Sri Lanka and Dublin in response to the questionnaire. The validation of a questionnaire through expert evaluation is widely acknowledged as the most effective method for establishing content validity (Özsungur, 2019; Rea, Marshall and Farrell, 2022). The expert assessment ensured that the questionnaire was comprehensive and aligned with the intended constructs, offering a strong foundation for high-quality research. Expert opinions were received regarding the rewording of items, the structure of the questionnaire, the wording of instructions, and the inclusion of additional items to enhance the questionnaire's quality. Following this, the survey was pilot-tested among 10 female digital entrepreneurs. They raised concerns about unclear questions and instructions, which were further refined based on the feedback. The refined questionnaire, which aligned with the feedback provided by the respondents, was again forwarded for expert opinions and further amended. The outcomes of the pilot testing are presented in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2 Outcomes Based on Pilot Testing

	Concerns Raised	**Strategies Implemented to Address the Concerns**
Experts	The same question was asked in two different directions to ensure respondents were filling out the questionnaire consciously. For example, if one question is "I feel the government incompetent…", try to put another question such as "I do not feel I get the institutional support." However, it is highlighted that utilising questions	The questionnaire has already incorporated attention checks and marker variables to ensure respondents fill out the questionnaires consciously. Although reverse coding was proposed as a remedial action to mitigate mindless answering (Cronbach, 1950), it became evident that such questions would compromise the overall measurement quality (Sliter and Zickar, 2014; Dueber *et*

	directed towards opposite directions in surveys can make it more difficult for the respondents to grasp the intended meaning of the question and respond accurately.	*al.*, 2022). Thus, it is evident that in the given context, the cost of adding reverse-coded measures can outstrip the benefits offered by such measures. Additionally, except for one expert, the other experts underscored the consequential impact of unilateral measures when applied in practical contexts. Therefore, it was decided not to add negatively oriented measures.
	Revising the measures to assess economic instability was recommended to ensure greater accuracy and relevance.	To best describe how unstable and fluctuating economic conditions impact entrepreneurial intention during economic instabilities, rather than solely relying on the measures developed by Linz and Semykina (2010), the researcher utilised the scales developed by Nabi and Liñán (2013) and Linz and Semykina (2010). Before incorporating the new set of measures, expert opinions were sought again to assess their suitability in comparison to the previous measures. Refer to Appendix I for the final measures on economic instability.
	In some sections (e.g., attitudes towards women), both positive and negative measures are included in	As mentioned earlier, previous literature has shown that incorporating both positive and negative-oriented items can lead to lower reliability estimates

	a mix that may lead to validity and reliability issues.	compared to instruments with a single orientation (Dueber *et al.*, 2022) and such scales result in degrading the overall quality (Sliter and Zickar, 2014). Thus, the two reverse-coded measures were removed from the scales to make them more user-friendly.
	"Digital business I started enabled me to achieve a higher position in society", and "Digital business I started enabled me to achieve something and gain recognition for it" are recognised as two measures that convey the same idea. Therefore, it is recommended to maintain one measure while removing the other.	By taking this suggestion on board, "Digital business I started enabled me to achieve something and get recognition for it" was removed. This also helped address the issue regarding the questionnaire's length.
	Paying more attention towards the language clarity of the translated questionnaire. In the translated questionnaire, certain measures conveyed different meanings compared to the original English statements.	The language of the translated questionnaire was further refined by maintaining a collaborative and iterative dialogue with the translator.
	Although the questionnaire's introductory note states that it will take 10 minutes to complete, it took more than 10 minutes to complete. It is recommended that	As suggested by the experts, the timing was changed to 15 minutes. In the meantime, as burdensome, lengthier questionnaires (Kay & Johnson, 1999) can deplete a survey's response rate, the

	more time be allocated to complete the questionnaire.	questionnaire was rigorously reviewed to identify and remove some measures, making it more concise.
Female Digital Entrepreneurs	It would have been better to clarify what will be counted as digital entrepreneurial ventures.	Although the instructions section mentioned digital entrepreneurial ventures, some respondents failed to notice it. Thus, it was marked as bold.
	The majority of the respondents suggested that the question "*Economic and social freedom is worth far more to women than acceptance of the ideal of femininity, which men have set up*" was not clear to them.	It was decided to remove this measure based on respondents' claims about the lack of clarity.
	The respondents were quite unfamiliar with the Sinhala terms related to role models and digital self-efficacy, which are not commonly used in daily conversations. Therefore, it was suggested that even in the Sinhala questionnaire, the relevant English term should be given before the Sinhala word.	English terms were used appropriately.

Upon completion of the data collection, the hypothesised causal relationships related to the factors affecting women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship were tested statistically. The researcher

used variance-based structural equation modelling (SEM) SMART PLS for the data analysis. The detailed data analysis process is elaborated upon in the subsequent chapter.

4.7.2.2 Survey Structure

The survey instrument is comprised of the following six sections; the complete survey is provided in Appendix I.

Section 1: Environmental Factors

Section 2: Personal Influences

Section 3: Personal Characteristics-Digital Self-Efficacy

Section 4: Personal Characteristics- Internal Motives

Section 5: Personal Characteristics-Fear of Failure

Section 6: Entrepreneurial Intention

Section 7: Personal Demographics

4.7.2.2.1 Section 1- Environmental Factors

This section comprises variables categorised as environmental influences based on the IDTGIT (Trauth and Connolly, 2021).

4.7.2.2.1.1 Economic instability

The first set of questions related to section 01 was used to gauge respondents' perceptions about the prevailing economic instability in Sri Lanka. Four measures, such as "*I am concerned about the possibility that I might not be able to provide myself/my family with the bare essentials in the next 12 months*", were adopted from Linz and Semykina (2010) and Nabi and Liñán (2013) to capture an individual's perceptions of economic insecurity. For each item, a higher response score indicates greater perceived insecurity. Rewording was necessary because the original items targeted employees. For instance, the item worded as *"It seems to me that I have few of those qualities that are valued in the economic situation of today"* (Linz and Semykina, 2010) was reworded as "*Even in a situation where I have to close my business tomorrow, I will be able to find some work that is as good as or better than my current business."* Furthermore, the original scale

of 5= "very concerned" and 1= "not concerned at all", was refined as 5= "strongly agree" and 1= "strongly disagree". While emphasising that the 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree is well received in the extant literature, Wyatt and Meyers, (1987) also emphasised that changing the Likert scale labels will not result in significant deviation if more nearly absolute endpoints are used in both instances.

4.7.2.2.1.2 Attitude towards women

Measures were derived based on the attitude towards women scale (AWS) developed by Spence and Hahn (1997). AWS was initially designed to gauge people's beliefs of rights, obligations, and appropriate conduct in a range of historically gendered contexts, and it has been well-received in the past (Parks and Roberton, 2004). Even though the original scale comprised 15 items, only 08 items out of it were adopted for this study. Removing some measures, such as "It is insulting to women to have the "obey" clause still in the marriage service" from the original scale was justifiable as those measures are not viable in the present-day context as the significant societal transformation has taken place over the years (Goonatilake, 1985; Donnelly *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, as the phenomenon under study pertains to women's economic participation, only measures related to women's economic activities were considered. Although the original scale items used a 4-point Likert scale with two extremes labelled as "agree strongly" and "disagree strongly," for this study, they were converted to a 5-point Likert scale. The five-point scale allows the respondents to express an indifferent opinion rather than be forced to agree or disagree, which is more appropriate for statistical analysis (Chyung *et al.*, 2017).

4.7.2.2.1.3 Perceived Formal Institutional Support

The final set of questions in Section 1 was designed to assess the extent to which female digital entrepreneurs perceive government initiatives as helpful to them. Three measures developed by Kazumi and Kawai (2017) were used for this study, where the example reads, "The people working for government agencies have been competent and effective in supporting the digital businesses of women." Three measures were related to the effectiveness of state sector employees, the availability and accessibility of services, and the state's commitment towards

uplifting FDE. No significant rewording was required because the original scale was related to female entrepreneurship. While the original scale was labelled as a 07-point Likert scale to maintain consistency, it has been converted into a 05-point Likert scale.

4.7.2.2.2 Section 2 - Personal Influences

As the individual influences were divided into two sub-constructs, namely personal influences and personal characteristics, Section 2 will focus on the variables categorised under personal influences, namely role models, family support, and positive entrepreneurial experiences. All these measures were used with a 05-point Likert scale.

4.7.2.2.2.1 Role models

The impact of influential role models was measured by adopting a formative construct developed by Nowiński and Haddoud (2019). If indicators form the latent construct, it can be called a formative construct, which is different from a reflective construct, where indicators are seen to be influenced by the construct (Hair, Ringle and Sarstedt, 2011). Based on Nowiński and Haddoud (2019), the construct "role model" is formed from three constructs, namely "entrepreneur in the family", "guest entrepreneur at the university", and "personal encounter with a successful entrepreneur", which were measured from the five-point Likert scale. To ensure that measures were better aligned with the specific needs of the present study, measures were adopted, and the sample measures were as follows: "Having a female entrepreneur in the family made me seriously consider embarking on an entrepreneurial career".

4.7.2.2.2.2 Family Support

Measures were used to address the family support experienced by female digital entrepreneurs in their respective entrepreneurial settings. Measures developed by King *et al.* (1995) to assess the latent variable related to the experience of family support in the corporate context were adapted for use in the context of female digital entrepreneurship. While the original family support inventory for the workers comprised 44 items, it was noted that researchers can use

a subset of measures based on the purpose of their particular study (King *et al.*, 1995). Thus, for this study, the researcher adopted the same four measures used by Powell and Eddleston (2013) in their research on gender and entrepreneurship.

4.7.2.2.2.3 Previous Work Experience

To measure the influence of previous work experience gained by women, the researcher used the measures developed by Madawala, Foroudi and Palazzo (2023). The four measures developed by Madawala, Foroudi and Palazzo (2023) focus on tourism industry-related work experience as a precursor to an individual's entrepreneurial engagement in the tourism field. All four measures were refined to make them more appropriate to the present context, where the sample measure stated, "Previous work experience motivated me to sustain myself in the business." These measures are related to the extent to which work experience enhances an individual's skills and competencies, builds their networks, and fosters their willingness to continue in the business.

4.7.2.2.3 Section 3 Personal Characteristics-Digital Self-Efficacy

Personal characteristics are one aspect of individual influences that focuses on one's abilities, interests and self-efficacy (Trauth, 2002). Among the subconstructs of personal characteristics, namely digital self-efficacy, internal motives, and fear of failure, this section comprised measures related to digital self-efficacy. According to the Social Cognitive Theory, to gain a more realistic understanding of self-efficacy, it should be measured related to a particular domain or task (Bandura, 2006; Wang *et al.*, 2020; Ulfert-Blank and Schmidt, 2022). Thus, self-efficacy related to digital technologies was recognised with different terms such as "internet self-efficacy", "computer-self efficacy", "ICT self-efficacy", and "digital self-efficacy" where the core of conception mainly evolves around an individual's judgement about his/her own capabilities in terms of using information and communication technology towards attaining a particular task (Ulfert-Blank and Schmidt, 2022). Thus, to capture digital self-efficacy holistically, the DSE scale developed by Ulfert-Blank and Schmidt (2022) was used as it covers broader dimensions of

information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety, and problem-solving.

Out of the 25 items from the original DSE scale, 11 items were carefully chosen for this study. As Internet and digital technologies are emerging areas in the Sri Lankan context, which is less regulated by legal authorities at the moment (Nagahawatta, Warren and Yeoh, 2020); respondents in the particular context might not have a clear idea about responding to questions from the original DSE scale such as "Defend myself against injustice in digital environments" and "manage and delete my digital footprint". Therefore, these measures were excluded when selecting the items of DSE relevant to the current study. Furthermore, measures such as "change digital content in a way that new content is created" "write a simple command in a programming language" "find the right digital system to meet non-technical challenges in line with the explanation," and "develop novel digital solutions" were also omitted as these are inappropriate for "mild" and "moderate" digital entrepreneurs (Hull *et al.*, 2007). Likewise, the most appropriate DSE measures related to the context were carefully identified.

4.7.2.2.4 Section 4 Personal Characteristics- Internal Motives

Section 4 was related to internal motive, a construct under the category of personal characteristics. The internal motive is an integrated factor where an array of motives combine to have an impact on an individual's internal motive (Kirkwood, 2009). Based on the existing literature, six inner motives —desire for self-realisation, financial success, recognition, innovation, and independence —were identified as the primary motivational drives that create internal motivations influencing women to pursue digital entrepreneurship. Individuals were asked to mark their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

4.7.2.2.4.1 Self-realisation

Four measures developed by Edelman *et al.* (2010) were used to measure the desire for self-realisation. These measures corresponded to the needs for the personal development scale

developed by Birley and Westhead (1994). Major rewordings were not required because the original scale was developed to measure startup motives. However, rewording of the original scale was needed as the labelling of the scale from "not important at all" to "very important" was changed as "strongly disagree' to "strongly agree". Such rewording to the original scale to guarantee the uniformity of presentation was substantiated in previous studies (Hills and Argyle, 2002). To align with the scale "strongly disagree' to "strongly agree", measures were ultimately written as statements such as "Establishing a digital business enables me to challenge myself".

4.7.2.2.4.2 Financial Success

The desire for financial success was measured using four items developed by Carter *et al.* (2007) for their study examining the motivations of nascent minority entrepreneurs to engage in entrepreneurial ventures. Out of the four items in the financial success scale developed by Carter *et al.* (2007), two were adopted from the studies of Birley and Westhead (1994) and Scheinberg and MacMillan (1988). These two items are "to give myself, my spouse, and children financial security" and "to earn a larger personal income". In addition to these two items, to gain a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon, Carter *et al.* (2007) created two other items: "financial security" and "build great wealth, high income." In the original scale items were framed as "To what extent are the following reasons important to you in establishing this new business?". These measures were adopted in a manner that allowed respondents to mark their answers on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Reworded items stated, "With the digital business that I started, I will be able to give myself, my spouse, and my children financial security."

4.7.2.2.4.3 Recognition

The desire for recognition as a latent construct was measured by adopting five measures developed by Shane, Kolvereid and Westhead (1991). Among the several well-established scales for measuring an individual's desire for recognition, Shane, Kolvereid and Westhead's (1991) measures were recognised as the most appropriate for this study, as these measures were initially developed to investigate the reasons for forming new businesses across different contexts and

genders. Furthermore, based on Iser (2013), individuals who are part of a larger complex society tend to expect recognition from various sources, such as family, friends, community, and the broader society. Thus, to understand an individual's desire for recognition, it needs to be measured in relation to various sources, which was accurately addressed through the measures developed by Shane, Kolvereid and Westhead (1991). After making the necessary changes, the adopted measure states "Digital business I started enabled me to achieve a higher position for myself in society".

4.7.2.2.4.4 Innovation

From the inception of recognising entrepreneurship as an academic discipline, innovation has been identified as a fundamental function (Greene *et al.*, 2003). It is essential to assess the extent to which an individual's desire to innovate drives their engagement in digital entrepreneurship using practical measurement tools. The researcher used the measures Birley and Westhead (1994) developed to measure the variable. Substantiating the appropriateness of these measures, several authors, including Carter *et al.* (2007) and Edelman *et al.* (2010), have utilised them to investigate the desire for innovation in the realm of entrepreneurship. The original three measures, using a five-point Likert scale, have been revised to make them more suitable for the new context. Ultimately, refined measures reflect that the phenomenon under discussion is digital entrepreneurship, where an example of an adopted measure is "Establishing this new digital business allows me to be innovative and at the forefront of new technology.

4.7.2.2.4.5 Independence

While the desire for independence can be interpreted in many ways, in this study, independence is described as an individual's ardent desire for freedom, authority, and flexibility over her own time (Scheinberg and MacMillan 1988; Birley and Westhead, 1994; Shane, 2005). Deeply rooted stereotypical gender norms result in women wearing multiple hats within a given period of time and performing different roles; as a result, they tend to give more consideration to their time commitments when it comes to the economic activities they undertake (Kodagoda and Samaratunge, 2023). Thus, the need for independence measures was expected to measure the extent to which they agree that digital entrepreneurship is a viable pathway to provide them more

control over their own time. The researcher adopted three measures developed by Shane, Kolvereid and Westhead (1991). Birley and Westhead (1994) have also adopted these measures to address the phenomenon of entrepreneurship. These original measures were written directly and concisely as "To control my own time, "To have greater flexibility for my personal and family life," and "To have considerable freedom to adapt my own approach to work," which made them align more closely with the purpose of this study.

4.7.2.2.5 Section 5 Personal Characteristics- Fear of Failure

This section included another construct that belongs to the category of personal characteristics, specifically "fear of failure". As fear of failure plays a pivotal role in entrepreneurship, and women tend to exhibit a higher fear of failure when compared to men (Koellinger, Minniti and Schade, 2013; Tsai, Chang and Peng, 2016b). Therefore, the researcher sought to investigate how the fear of failure deterred women from entering the digital business sector. Measuring fear of failure as a single item with a dichotomous response has been the widely adopted approach in present-day entrepreneurial research (Koellinger, Minniti and Schade, 2013; Cacciotti and Hayton, 2015; Tsai, Chang and Peng, 2016b). Therefore, this study also adopted the same single-item dichotomous measure, "whether fear of failure would prevent them from starting a business," to measure respondents' fear of failure. Respondents are expected to respond to their judgment as "yes" or "no".

4.7.2.2.6 Section 6 Entrepreneurial Intention

With the recognition of entrepreneurial intention as the predominant precursor of entrepreneurial behaviour, women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship was recognised as the criterion variable in the given study. While the intention to engage in behaviour has long been recognised as a critical factor for predicting entrepreneurial behaviour (Fayolle and Liñán, 2014), there has been a wide array of measures developed over the years to measure an individual's intention to engage in entrepreneurship (Liñán, Urbano and Guerrero, 2011; Shao-Hui, Ping and Peng-Peng, 2011; Kong, Zhao and Tsai, 2020). A significant proportion of studies in the academic field of entrepreneurship primarily focus on undergraduates and postgraduates who are not real

entrepreneurs but rather individuals who indicate a likelihood of setting up a business in the future, serving as the primary respondents (Shao-Hui, Ping and Peng-Peng, 2011; Tsai, Chang and Peng, 2016b). These studies did not explore the experiences of actual entrepreneurs who are actively involved in business ventures. Thus, to best reflect the intention of novice female digital entrepreneurs, 03 five-point Likert scale measures developed by Chakraborty and Biswal, (2023) were adopted. These measures can be seen as an attempt to capture the entrepreneurial mindset, as evidenced by statements like "Engaging in online business activities brings me satisfaction."

4.7.2.2.7 Section 7 Personal Demographics

The last section of the questionnaire consisted of questions on personal demographics. The personal demographics as a subconstruct of individual identity in the IDTGIT emphasise the role played by variables such as age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), marital status, geography and educational background, which all impact women's engagement in digital technologies (Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Age was measured using an ordinal scale: 18-24 years, 25-34 years, 35-44 years, 45-54 years, and 55 years or above. Marital status was measured using a nominal scale: "single, married, divorced or separated". For the level of income, an ordinal scale was used, where respondents were asked to mark their average monthly income on a scale ranging from "Below Rs 20,000","Rs 20000 -Rs 60000", "Rs 60001 - Rs 100000", "Rs 100001 - Rs 200000" and "above Rs 200000". Educational attainment was measured using an ordinal scale, where categories included "Below GCE Ordinary Level," "GCE Ordinary Level," "GCE Advanced Level or Equivalent," "Diploma Holder," "Undergraduate Degree Holder," and "Postgraduate Degree Holder." To collect responses regarding the geographic location of the participants, respondents were asked to indicate the type of area in which they currently live. The two available options for this classification were "Municipal and Urban Councils" or "Pradesheeya Sabhas (rural municipalities)".

In addition to these questions related to the respondents' demographic variables, two further questions were incorporated to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of digital entrepreneurial ventures and the widespread use of technological devices. As this study encompasses a broader spectrum of digital entrepreneurship, in line with the definition provided by Hull *et al.* (2007) to

gain a more nuanced understanding of the nature of digital businesses, respondents were asked to specify the industry that best describes the digital business they are currently engaged in. The response options were presented in a nominal scale format. Ultimately, respondents were asked about the technology devices they use to access the internet. For this question, response options included "personal computer," "smartphone," "laptop," and "tablet." Specific instructions were given to tick all the options they use, rather than ticking only one option.

4.5.5..7.1 Attention Check

The questionnaire primarily consisted of statements that respondents were asked to evaluate using a five-point Likert scale. Due to the survey's format, there is a potential for respondents to provide stereotypical or thoughtless responses without fully engaging with the content of each question. Likert (1932) emphasised that stereotyped responses can undermine the accuracy of the data. To address the issue of inattentive responses, the researcher employed a specific attention check strategy known as "direct queries". In practice, these types of questions are often referred to as "trap questions" and typically take the form of instructing respondents to answer a question in a particular manner before continuing with the rest of the survey (Abbey and Meloy, 2017). Incorporating such attention checks is crucial for enhancing the overall quality of the data, leading to more robust and statistically meaningful outcomes. However, it is important to acknowledge that attention checks may lead to a higher loss of sample subjects, potentially reducing statistical power (Abbey and Meloy, 2017). Thus, the researcher made an informed decision to incorporate attention checks, which resulted in achieving data quality at the tradeoff of potentially losing respondents.

Towards the end of Sections 1 and 4, the researcher included two attention-check questions designed to identify inattentive respondents. In the first question, respondents were asked, *"Which is the first month of the year?" with response options including October, December, January, and March.* However, explicit instructions were provided to select "December" as the correct answer. In the second question, respondents were asked, *"What is the name of a baby dog?" Response options included Doggy, Cat, Camry, and Rabbit, but respondents were explicitly instructed to choose "cat" as the correct answer.* These attention-check questions were incorporated to ensure respondents paid attention to the survey and provided thoughtful responses.

4.5.5..7.2 Marker Variables

Common Method Bias (CMB) is a commonly recognised concern in quantitative research studies, mainly when both the independent and dependent variables are assessed using the same data collection method (Kock, Berbekova and Assaf, 2021). In this study also, a single questionnaire was employed to gather data for both the predictor and criterion variables, which introduced the potential risk of CMB. Behavioural research has extensively documented this CMB issue, and researchers have consistently sought ways to address it (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Eliminating CMB entirely is a formidable challenge, but scholars have developed various procedural and statistical techniques to mitigate its impact over the years. The existence of CMB can jeopardise the validity of research findings by distorting the observed relationships, potentially leading to Type I and Type II errors, a point emphasised by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003) and Lance *et al.* (2010).

Recognising the potential for CMB in this study, proactive steps were taken during the survey design phase to minimise its influence. One of the strategies employed was the introduction of a "marker variable" into the questionnaire. A marker variable is a construct conceptually unrelated to the substantive variables of interest in the survey, as described by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003) and Williams, Hartman and Cavazotte (2010). In this study, the variable "focused immersion related to the web", which describes the extent to which individuals engage deeply with online activities, was used as the marker variable (Agarwal and Karahanna, 2000). Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with statements using a five-point Likert scale, such as "While using the Web, I am able to block out most other distractions." This marker variable was incorporated into the survey to detect and control for potential common method bias, thereby ensuring the validity of the data collected in this study.

4.7.3 Stage 3: In-depth Interviews

The final data collection stage involved semi-structured interviews with 25 female digital entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka. The interviews were conducted to delve deeper into the intricacies of the factors driving FDE. Furthermore, through these interviews, the researcher sought to understand how intersectional dynamics impact FDE and how women can challenge the deeply ingrained societal structures, facilitating social change through their engagement in FDE. The interviewees selected through purposive sampling were interviewed over a six-month period. Except for two, all the interviews were conducted digitally via the DCU account-based Zoom platform. On the agreed-upon dates and times, interviews were conducted as scheduled, with a duration of between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted in both English and Sinhala. Interviews conducted in the Sinhala medium were then translated into English. Further information on the translation process was given in the next chapter under Section 6.3.

As the interviews took the form of semi-structured interviews, a broad interview guide was used. The interview guide paved the way for a focused discussion, ensuring consistency while allowing respondents to share their ideas freely. Furthermore, a rigorously developed interview guide improves the trustworthiness of the semi-structured interview as a qualitative research method (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The interview guide was pilot-tested with two female digital entrepreneurs, and based on feedback received, it was refined to ensure all questions were clear and served the purpose of the study. The qualitative data analysis chapter elaborates on the amendments made to the interview guide based on the results of the pilot interviews. All the interviews, except one (for which consent was not received from the interviewee), were audio recorded to ensure that transcripts were well-written and accurate. By recognising the importance of creating a conducive environment for respondents in qualitative research (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009) from the inception, the researcher worked on creating a comfortable environment for respondents. The purpose of the interview was clearly explained, and respondents were given sufficient time to clarify their doubts, ensuring they remained comfortable throughout the interview process (Bryman, 2006). Post-interview reflective notes were taken after each interview to capture interesting points and valuable contributions.

To determine the quality of the qualitative research, the researcher relied on the validity determination criterion proposed by Venkatesh, Brown, and Bala (2013). Regardless of the qualitative approach being used, ranging from phenomenology, narrative analysis, grounded theory approach, thematic analysis, or any other innovative approach, identifying themes is at the heart of any qualitative study (Mishra and Dey, 2022). Deriving themes requires mindfully integrating the expressed subjective states rooted in the respondents' minds with the theory, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Just as reaching the same destination can be accomplished via various routes, these themes can be elicited from diverse perspectives or vantage points. Even though the purpose and procedure of recognising themes may take different forms based on the methodology and research questions addressed through the study (Braun and Clarke, 2006), it is imperative to clearly articulate how the themes are generated to substantiate academic rigour. In feminist research, the focus is on amplifying women's voices. Researchers often employ methods such as Thematic Analysis (TA) and Grounded Theory (GT) to understand and highlight their experiences (Clarke and Braun, 2019). This study analysed data using thematic analysis, a widely accepted data analysis strategy in qualitative research. Clarke & Braun (2019) substantiate the adoption of thematic analysis in feminist studies. Previous scholars who explored FDE predominantly relied on thematic analysis, indicating the appropriateness of thematic analysis to this area (Martin and Wright, 2005; Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017a; Adikaram and Razik, 2023; Atarah and Nolan, 2023; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023).

Although integrating the findings of the two studies plays a very important role in mixed-method research, most mixed-method studies often fail to provide integrated findings (Fielding, 2012). In the given study, after conducting the data analysis independently, findings derived from Study 2 and Study 3 were integrated, aligning with the guidelines given by O'Cathain, Murphy, and Nicholl (2010). The integration process results in the development of meta-inferences that provide deeper insights into the study's findings.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the research philosophy that shaped how the study was conducted. Methodological choices related to conducting the study were elaborated with sufficient justifications. At its inception, the mixed methodology was elaborated in this study, emphasising its appropriateness. The mixed method based on the GRAMMS guidelines was elaborated upon. The overall study was comprised of three stages: Stage 1. expert interviews, Stage 2. survey, and Stage 3. semi-structured interviews. Sampling, data collection, and analysis for each stage were explained, and the choices justified theoretically and practically. Integrating the findings were discussed briefly, emphasising the stage at which the two primary studies were integrated.

Chapter Five

Preliminary Expert Interviews

Chapter 5: Preliminary Expert Interviews

5.1 Introduction

This chapter details the preliminary expert interviews conducted to gain a nuanced understanding of how female digital entrepreneurship (FDE) unfolds at the grassroots level in Sri Lanka. These interviews served as an essential first step in the research process, providing contextual insights from practitioners and stakeholders directly related to the FDE. By capturing diverse perspectives on the opportunities, challenges, and dynamics experienced by female digital entrepreneurs, the expert interviews helped shape the subsequent phases of the study and informed the development of research instruments and sampling strategies for the main research. By exploring the practicalities of data collection and identifying potential challenges in advance, this phase provided valuable insights that informed subsequent adjustments to the research design, ultimately strengthening the foundation for the main study.

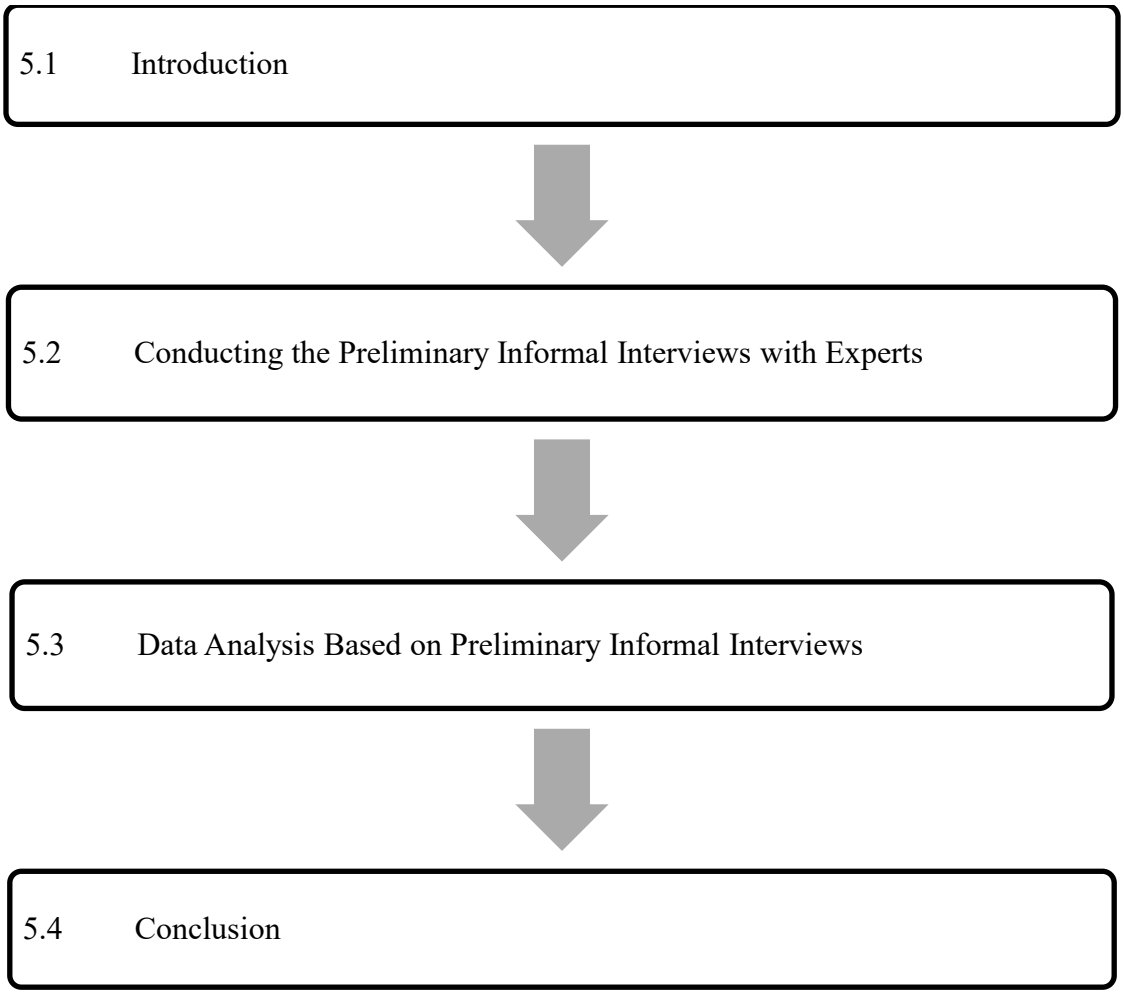

Figure 5.1 Chapter Structure

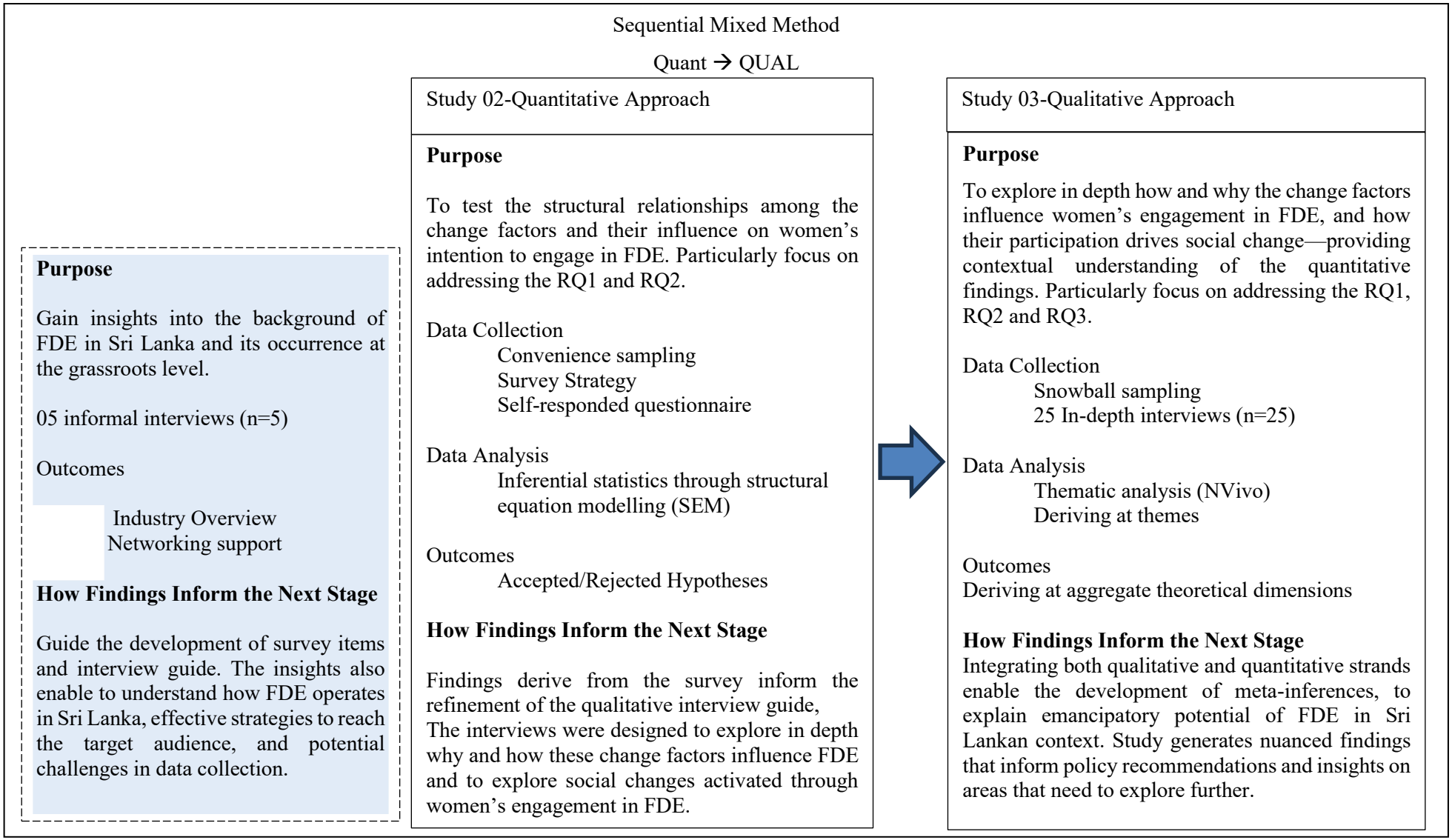

Figure 5.1 Road Map of the Study

5.2 Conducting the Preliminary Informal Interviews with Experts

While researchers conduct expert interviews for different purposes, expert interviews that will be conducted to attain knowledge and direction related to a field of study which is completely unknown or known very little are recognised as exploratory expert interviews (Döringer, 2021). Given that FDE is a novel and under-documented field in the Sri Lankan context, with a paucity of general understanding (De Silva *et al.*, 2021), the researcher conducted exploratory expert interviews informally at the study's inception. These interviews were crucial for gaining insights into background information on FDE in the Sri Lankan context and understanding how it occurs at the grassroots level. As substantiated by the previous literature, these exploratory interviews help to gain insights and background understanding of the state of entrepreneurship in a contextualised manner (Reynolds *et al.*, 2005; Preisendörfer, Bitz and Bezuidenhout, 2012; Hommel and Bican, 2020; Döringer, 2021) and to develop the overall research design and the data collection strategies more effectively (Preisendörfer, Bitz and Bezuidenhout, 2012).

Furthermore, as emphasised by Singh (2014), these interviews serve as door openers for data collection, as the networks and connections developed through these experts facilitate approaching individuals related to the primary data collection. While there is no consensus on the criteria for determining who the experts are, researchers aligned with the criterion used by Preisendörfer, Bitz and Bezuidenhout (2012) to identify national experts in entrepreneurship. Therefore, it was decided that a person will be qualified as a national expert on the field of FDE if he or she has practical experience in the role of founding process of a digital business initiative or if he/or she has hands-on experience in running a governmental or non-governmental support programme focusing on uplifting the female entrepreneurship in the country. Five experts who met these criteria were selected, and exploratory nature interviews were conducted to get an overview of how things are happening at the grassroots level and what needs to be considered when conducting the study. The industry experts were selected based on purposive sampling, and to identify the experts, the researcher used her personal network. Below Table 5.1 gives a brief overview about the respondent profile.

Table 5.1 Respondent Profile

Respondent	Gender	Background
Fazeela	Female	Founder of a freelance platform in Sri Lanka that connects freelancers and employers. Currently coaching women participating in startup ventures and actively investing in startup initiatives.
Lakshika	Female	The proprietor of an online children's clothing brand specialising in custom-made outfits. The business has been in operation for over seven years.
Udara	Male	Founder and CEO of a leading digital marketing agency in Sri Lanka. Presently collaborates with youth from various universities and institutions in Sri Lanka, aiming to advance the country's digitalisation process.
Maheshi	Female	Founder and chairperson of a well-known social enterprise established to foster women's progress and welfare through empowerment initiatives. She has accumulated over two decades of experience in the corporate sector, particularly as a marketing expert.
Nishani	Female	Representative from the women technopreneur forum of a national chamber primarily focusses on IT sector businesses' interests in Sri Lanka.

Interviews were informal and conducted through Zoom and telephone, based on the preferences of the interviewees. Even though an interview guide was used rather than relying on it in a more structured and orderly manner, it was used to glean as many insights as possible about how the FDE operates at the grassroots level. Thus, questions were mainly focused on three broad aspects: (1) gaining an overview of FDE in Sri Lanka, (2) exploring the enablers that drive and the barriers that confine FDE, (3) attaining an understanding of the possible challenges and considerations that the researcher has to go through during the data collection. As respondents play diverse roles in the field of FDE, the interview questions were adjusted to accommodate each

respondent while ensuring that the key aspects mentioned above were covered as thoroughly as possible. Based on Hommel and Bican (2020) in semi-structured interviews, the interviewer is expected to adjust questions based on the interviewees' responses to get essential insights. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes; four interviews were audiotaped, and one was conducted off the record at the respondents' request (extensive notes were taken).

5.3 Data Analysis Based on Preliminary Informal Interviews

All the interviews were transcribed, and pseudonyms were used to preserve the interviewees' privacy. Through basic thematic analysis, the researcher derived the key points emphasised by the experts, which will help refine the research design.

The data structure table was derived from the information gathered during the preliminary informal interviews. The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing for the identification and organization of key themes and patterns relevant to female digital entrepreneurship at the grassroots level. However, this analysis did not go into extensive depth, as the preliminary interviews were intended to serve as a supplementary component to the main study. The resulting data structure table 5.2 provided a foundational framework that informed the development of the main research instruments and guided the focus of subsequent data collection.

Table 5.2 Data Structure

Deriving at the first order codes	Theoretical Categories (second order themes)	Aggregate Theoretical Dimension
Statements about digital entrepreneurship covers broader areas, major differences between digital entrepreneurship and traditional entrepreneurship, physical business runs in a digital platform and completely digital business.	Digital entrepreneurship is becoming more common. Typology of digital businesses	Broader definition of digital entrepreneurship

Statements about gender stereotypes, family responsibilities, poor educational opportunities, lack of government support, inadequate support from the banks, lack of networking opportunities, old boys' network, high price of technology equipment, digital entrepreneurship as a less esteemed career, digital entrepreneurship to navigate gender norms related barriers, digital entrepreneurship as a cost-effective mode	Gender as a liability Navigating barriers through digital entrepreneurship Barriers to Female Digital Entrepreneurship	Efforts to expand gender boundaries through digital entrepreneurship
Statements about female digital entrepreneurship been Colombo centric, urban bias, information limited to known circle, limited awareness about the possibilities of digital technologies.	Differential access to technology, funding, and information	Digital divide
Statements about lack of role models, women already in digital entrepreneurship feel jealous about other women trying to step into FDE, strong desire to become role models due to the bad experienced they had	Bad experiences with role models	Queen bees in FDE
Statements about having only a few female digital entrepreneurs who are seriously doing their business, reluctance to fill up online surveys due to cybersecurity-related threats, a	Difficulties related to accessing the potential respondents	Challenges for data collection

handful of female digital entrepreneurs who are active on social networking sites and work closely with the government repetitively invited for interviews		

Based on the aggregate theoretical dimensions identified through the data structure tables, the following key findings were developed. These findings synthesize the main patterns and themes that emerged from the preliminary analysis, offering a conceptual foundation for understanding female digital entrepreneurship at the grassroots level.

- Among the respondents, it is commonly understood that FDE encompasses all ventures that partially or fully utilise digital technology. Therefore, findings based on interviews substantiated the use of Hull *et al.* (2007) typology of digital entrepreneurship for this study.
- Respondents had the common sentiment that FDE enabled women to overcome the barriers they experienced in the brick-and-mortar world. They further emphasised that women could improve their status in society through their engagement in FDE. However, respondents also emphasised that specific barriers hinder women's pathways to digital entrepreneurship, and these barriers can be more pronounced for rural women than for urban women due to the prevalence of the digital divide.
- An interesting aspect found through the interviews was the reluctance of women to act as role models for other women. Respondents expressed their sentiments about successful female digital entrepreneurs who do not want to support other women, as they are protective of their success and perceive these other players as a threat to their position.
- Through the interviews, valuable insights were received about the possible challenges that may emerge in real data collection, such as interview fatigue, fear of opening survey links due to cyberattacks, etc. Respondents explained the interview fatigue experienced by the handful of female digital entrepreneurs as they were interviewed multiple times by different parties. For instance, respondents

noted that some of these women had to attend numerous events and gave 5-6 interviews during Women's Week, which exhausted them. They emphasised their reluctance to conduct interviews and surveys due to this fatigue.

- No agency/government institute in Sri Lanka has clear statistics on female digital entrepreneurship.
- These interviews facilitated the establishment of networks, which in turn helped to build connections with potential participants. Interviews served as a strategic entry point, enabling the researcher to create rapport and establish trust with potential participants. By leveraging these initially developed networks, the researcher will be able to access a broader pool of potential respondents.

5.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of female digital entrepreneurship (FDE) operates in the Sri Lankan context which is completely unknown or known very little. The findings from the preliminary expert interviews offered valuable insights into how FDE unfolds in practice, highlighting both the processes and challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. These insights were instrumental in shaping the sequential stages of the main study by informing the research focus and methodological approach. Most importantly, this phase enabled the researcher to identify significant challenges related to data collection, particularly the scarcity of female digital entrepreneurs in the field. Addressing these challenges led to the development of a network-based approach for accessing participants.

Chapter Six

Quantitative Data Analysis

Chapter 6: Quantitative Data Analysis

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on presenting and explaining the findings of the quantitative data analysis phase of the mixed-method study. Figure 6.1 will showcase the structure of the chapter below. First, the purpose of the study will be reiterated. Responses related to the survey will be discussed, emphasising the researcher's reflections and response rate. The data screening process will be elaborated, highlighting the steps to ensure the dataset is usable for dependable data analysis. An elaboration of the sample profile will follow this. Conducting data analysis using the partial least squares structural equation modelling with SMART PLS will elaborate. Determining the validity and reliability based on the outer model of the study will be discussed first, and structural model analysis by utilising the inner model of the study will then be elaborated. The chapter will end with an overview of the results that will be derived from the hypothesis testing.

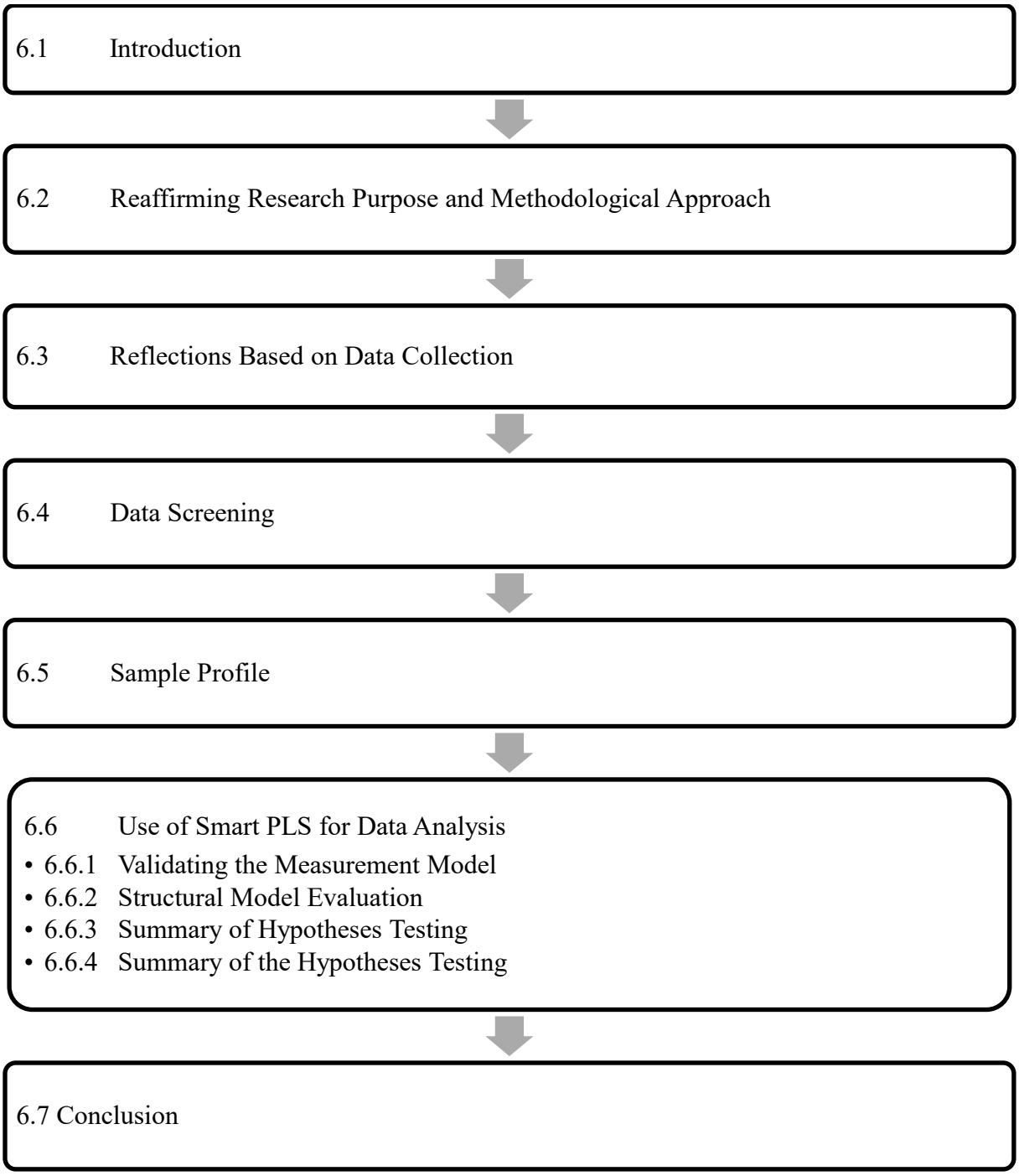

Figure 6.1 Chapter Structure

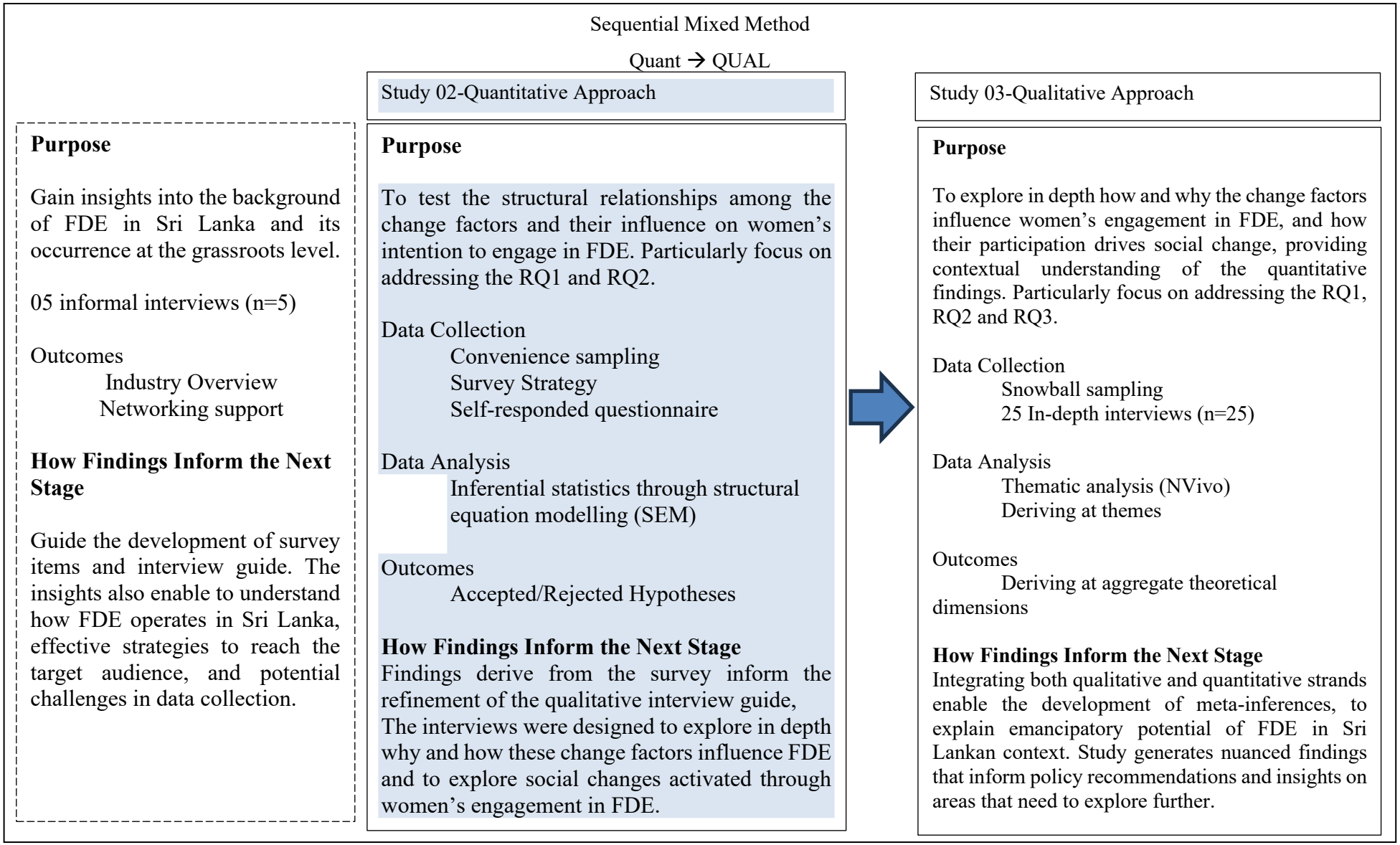

Figure 6.2 Road Map of the Study

6.2 Reaffirming Research Purpose and Methodological Approach

While emphasising the scarcity of research on the novel field of FDE, researchers have highlighted the significance of conducting more studies on how FDE can liberate women from the constraining environmental conditions in which they are embedded (Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). Bridging the gaps in the extant literature, this study focused on the emancipatory potential of FDE in the Sri Lankan context. Aligning with Rindova, Barry and Ketchen's (2009) conceptualisation of entrepreneurship as emancipation, the study explored the emancipatory potential of FDE as a process where women break free from the status quo that constrains their pathway and how the engagement in FDE uplifts the position of women through activating transformation in the social order. Therefore, on one end, a wide array of factors that influence women to break the status quo and participate in FDE, and on the other end, how their new identity as female digital entrepreneurs influences the activation of social change was recognised as the key elements of the study. This study also addressed the call by Welter (2020) to go beyond how contexts impact women's entrepreneurship and explore how women can enact their contexts through entrepreneurship. The study focuses on three research questions based on the gaps in the extant literature on FDE.

RQ 1 What are the **change factors** that drive Sri Lankan women to engage in female digital entrepreneurship?

RQ 2 How does the digital entrepreneurial journey vary among the women in Sri Lanka as their **gender intersects with other social ascriptions?**

RQ 3 What are the **transformative changes activated** through women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship?

Alhajri and Aloud (2024) emphasised that to attain the legitimisation of FDE as a field of study, it is imperative to conduct studies using different methodological approaches. Therefore, this study followed an explanatory sequential mixed-method approach, intending to holistically understand FDE's emancipatory potential. In phase 1 of the study, the researcher conducted informal interviews with experts to ascertain understanding at the grassroots level. In Phase 2, the

quantitative study focused on hypothesis testing related to change factors that drive women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship. In Phase 3, the qualitative study was based on semi-structured interviews to explore how and why these change factors influence FDE, how women's engagement is influenced by their intersectional identities and discover the transformation of social order through FDE. This chapter focused on Phase 2 of the study, where the researcher tested the hypotheses. Integrating the theoretical insights received from the IDTGIT (Trauth and Quesenberry, 2006; Trauth and Connolly, 2021) and intersectionality , the researcher developed a hypothesis about social and individual factors that influence women's engagement in FDE, which was tested based on data collected through a survey.

This study particularly focuses on citizens of Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka is expected to reflect the broader South Asian experience, providing a meaningful context for understanding FDE within the region. Restricting the sample to citizens of Sri Lanka does limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized to the broader South Asian population. Even though a complete generalization is not practical, Sri Lanka serves as a valuable case study for investigating FDE because it shares many structural, cultural, and historical similarities with other South Asian countries, while also possessing unique contextual features. As a result, research conducted in Sri Lanka can yield insights relevant to the region, even if the results are not fully generalizable in a statistical sense. Additionally, the decision to focus solely on Sri Lanka was influenced the study's cross-sectional design, which took place over a limited period, and the novelty of the field, which raised challenges regarding data availability. These constraints made it practically difficult to collect data from multiple South Asian countries. As such, concentrating on a single country enabled a deeper and more nuanced contextual analysis, while also providing a strong foundation for future comparative research across the region.

6.3 Reflections Based on Data Collection

A low response rate is a common challenge for researchers conducting web-based surveys and possibly more challenging when the population comprises a niche or hard-to-reach audience (Kühne and Zindel, 2020). The researcher was aware of the data collection challenges based on the informal interviews with experts and the published information about FDE in Sri Lanka.

Therefore, multiple approaches were used to disseminate the survey among potential respondents to enhance the response rate.

The survey commenced with disseminating the questionnaire through social networking sites (SNS). The effectiveness of SNS in approaching a hard-to-reach audience has been substantiated in much of the extant literature (Baltar and Brunet, 2012; Bhutta, 2012; Kühne and Zindel, 2020). Furthermore, the target population is expected to be heavy users of SNS as they are into online business. Therefore, dissemination of questionnaires through SNS is much more appropriate. Besides the SNS, the researcher also used other channels to reach the anticipated number of responses, as female digital entrepreneurs represent a hard-to-reach audience. Parallel to posting the questionnaire to Facebook groups for female community support, it was shared among the key governmental and non-governmental organisations closely working with female digital entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka. Survey links for both Sinhala and English surveys were shared among these authoritative individuals. Additionally, the survey link was shared among the key universities and diploma-awarding institutions offering dedicated educational entrepreneurship programmes. Lastly, the researcher shared the survey with all her contacts and networks, requesting that they share the link and encourage female digital entrepreneurs to take it.

Even though a high response rate for the online survey in the first few days after posting it (Bartholomew and Smith, 2006) was expected, the response rate was alarmingly low. In fact, only five respondents completed the questionnaire after the first two days. On top of the respondents' general dislike of filling out a questionnaire, it became evident that the low response for the survey disseminated by the researcher was owed much to the cyber security concerns individuals were having related to clicking a link that has been shared by someone who was not personally known to them. A few female digital entrepreneurs whom the researcher approached later to ask to complete the survey explicitly communicated about the risk they perceived when they initially saw the post on women's community groups. Sheehan (2001) indicated that one of the key factors affecting low response rates for an online survey is perceived threats of viruses disseminated through unsolicited online communications. The accounts on SNS play a predominant role in the businesses conducted by many of these women; therefore, they tend to avoid unsolicited communications by clicking links to avoid being victims of virus attacks or cyber scams. The

researcher used several strategies to enhance the response rate, which resulted in boosting the response rates immensely. The researcher's experience related to the data collection process through the survey is briefly outlined in Table 6.1 below.

With all these initiatives, by the third and fourth days of data collection, the researcher got a significantly high response from the target audience. Navigating the landscape of low female digital entrepreneurs and a low response rate for online questionnaires presented formidable challenges throughout the data collection process and gave some unforgettable experiences. In one instance, the respondent was so offended when the researcher called and asked to fill out the questionnaire. She threatened the researcher that if the researcher called her again, she would inform the police. In another instance, one of the potential respondents misunderstood the researcher as a person hired by her abusive husband to spy on her as she demanded a divorce. Despite the challenges, initiatives taken by the researcher proved to be much more rewarding as they enabled not only to increase the response rate but to identify some interesting female entrepreneurs, such as two research scientists (PhD holders) who started off manufacturing baby skin care products with 100% local organic ingredients. In an academic-centric country like Sri Lanka, where people are expected to get a good education and work in higher positions in established businesses, these women's battle to climb uphill against all odds can be considered inspiring. Most importantly, individuals like them were very interested in the study. When the researcher informed them about Phase 2 of data collection through interviews, many candidates readily agreed to be interviewed. By the end of the first week, 95 responses were collected, of which 56 were in English, and the remaining 39 questionnaires were filled in Sinhala. The follow-up calls, comments to the posts, and follow-ups with Facebook influencers were used continuously until 5th February 2024. In this way, the researcher managed to get 161 responses, which marked the end of the survey. Marking the completion of the data collection through the survey, the researcher personally sent messages thanking the admins of the Facebook groups and representatives from respective organisations to appreciate their unwavering support towards the data collection.

Table 6.1 Overview of the Strategies Used at the Data Collection

	Strategies	Implementation Details
To disseminate the questionnaire	1. Posted the survey on Facebook groups targeted towards women's empowerment and digital businesses	• A survey poster (with a link to the survey) was posted with a small message on eight Facebook groups. • To reduce the length of the post and minimise confusion, the group admins advised publishing only one poster at a time, either in English or Sinhala. Group admins informed the researcher about how their audience primarily uses language. • The post was approved and published on five pages within the first week. One group rejected the post due to the group's policy of not approving posts with external links. The remaining two groups ignored the post. • To ensure wider survey distribution, personal messages were sent to the group admins who rejected the survey, asking them to reconsider their decision. These requests did not receive any positive responses.
	2. The questionnaire was disseminated through the key governmental and non-governmental organisations closely working with female digital entrepreneurs.	• These officials gave uneven support; some went the extra mile to support while others expressed dislikeness towards the survey directly and indirectly. • Sometimes, unsupportive officials offered very frustrating and downgrading comments, reflecting the "cold war" between industry and academia. • To overcome the challenges of unsupportive officials, the researcher took a much more conservative approach when dealing with these industry experts. • The researcher engaged in telephone conversations that lasted more than an hour, where the officials repeatedly highlighted their

		contribution to the field, talked to many individuals in the same organisations, and explained the same thing repeatedly. • In retrospect, the conservative approach the researcher used enabled these officials' involvement significantly. • Proving the positive impact of the endorsements given by the professionals and officials from the trade associations to increase the response rates of the surveys (Bartholomew and Smith, 2006), survey response rates increased significantly when the questionnaire was endorsed by these influential individuals and shared by them.
	3. A survey link was shared among the key universities and diploma-awarding institutions offering dedicated educational entrepreneurship programmes.	• Uneven support was received from the academics attached to the universities. • Lecturers were unsupportive, perceiving the researcher as an outsider. In the Sri Lankan context, academics mostly read for their PhDs by taking study leave from their full-time academic jobs. However, the researcher was not fully attached to any academic institute in Sri Lanka when she was conducting the study, resulting in her being perceived as an outsider. Furthermore, with the growing concerns about the suboptimal online and hybrid PhD programmes offered in Sri Lanka, when the researcher said she conducted her study while staying in SL, lecturers were trying to stereotype her PhD as a suboptimal online programme. • The researcher emphasised the credentials of her research supervisors, which played an imperative role in building trust and getting them involved.
	4. Shared the questionnaire with the researcher's personal network and encouraged female digital entrepreneurs to take the survey and share it with others.	• This was a time-consuming process, yet the researcher engaged in it to attain a higher response rate.

Strategies taken to enhance the response rate	1. Make the survey outlook more user-friendly.	• As most Sri Lankans rely on mobile phones to access the internet (Wattegama, 2021), efforts were made to make the poster mobile-friendly. When preparing the survey poster, a vertical layout was used as it is more appropriate for mobile phones. • When designing the poster, blue was used as blue is the widely appreciated colour in digital marketing campaigns (Jandal, 2024). Sample survey posters are given below in Appendix J).
	2. The support of the group admins was sought to promote the survey.	• The researcher relied on the groups' admins who had established credibility, authority, and a significant follower base on one or more social media platforms. As emphasised by the extant literature (Baltar and Brunet, 2012; Bhutta, 2012), the influential role played by the Facebook group administrators enhanced the survey response rates immensely. • Contacting the group admins were challenging. As substantiated by Bhutta (2012), due to the significant number of unsolicited messages received by the group administrators, they were skeptical towards such unsolicited messages and requests. • While many page admins and influencers recognised the survey as a worthy cause and created posts encouraging followers to join the survey, others did not provide sufficient support. • Even the ones who promised to post a word of encouragement on their respective social networking groups did not act on their word. After the initial discussions, some of them even completely stopped communication with the researcher. They did not respond to the researcher's phone calls and messages on WhatsApp and Messenger. Some showed concerns that they were uncomfortable sharing any web link from a third party on their pages or accounts. • Overall, it is evident that using social media influencers to promote the questionnaire's filling resulted in higher responses.
	3. The researcher contacted female digital entrepreneurs through their Facebook and Instagram pages and	• The absence of face-to-face interactions and personal connections in online surveys, together with an amplified spread of IT viruses, has

	requested that they complete the survey.	been pivotal for the low response rates (Sánchez-Fernández, Muñoz-Leiva and Montoro-Ríos, 2012) • For web-based surveys, soliciting potential respondents via phone calls and sharing the survey proved to be a very effective strategy to overcome feelings of anonymity and uncertainty (Sheehan, 2001; Sánchez-Fernández, Muñoz-Leiva and Montoro-Ríos, 2012) • Substantiating the extant literature, although the task was time-consuming, it was a very productive strategy to enhance the response rate. • Sri Lanka being an educationally heavy country with high power distance; some respondents were delighted to receive a phone call from a researcher attached to Dublin City University, Ireland. They promptly filled out the questionnaire and introduced the researcher to other female digital entrepreneurs as well. Hewamanne (2020), who explored the garment factory workers in Sri Lanka, explained how overwhelmed the respondents of her study were to be introduced to her professor friend who came from the United States to visit the respondent's families and community. • However, not all the phone calls resulted in a positive manner, where, in certain instances, the researcher was reprimanded for being an intruder and trying to waste their time. • In spite of the complexities involved in personalised phone calls, these conversations proved to be rewarding as they enabled an increase to the response rate.
	4. Considered the possibility of linking the survey for some monetary benefits.	• Despite the extant literature substantiating the effectiveness of the incentives/gifts towards increasing the response rates in both mail and web surveys (Göritz, 2006; Fan and Yan, 2010) the monetary-reward approach was not used in this study. • Random identification of respondents in an anonymous survey was more challenging, and it requires careful attention towards the possible ethical concerns that may arise. For instance, there can be concerns about respondents who already completed the survey trying to retake it to take part in the "giveaway,"

	5. the follow-up calls, follow-up comments to the posts, and follow-ups with Facebook influencers	• The follow-up process was undertaken continuously until 5th February 2024. • In this way, the researcher managed to get 161 responses, which marked the end of the survey.

6.4 Data Screening

Out of the respondents who took the survey, 73 had fully completed the English medium one and the Sinhala medium survey was completed by 88, accounting for 161 fully completed responses. One respondent declared that she did not want to participate in the survey. The data set was screened to identify the potential issues and to ensure remedial actions were taken to alleviate such problems, which may have adverse implications for the results deriving from the data analysis.

First, to screen out the respondents who took part in the survey in an inattentive manner, responses to the attention checks were evaluated. Based on the extant literature, different strategies were recognised to deal with attention check failures, ranging from removing the respondents who failed the attention check, presenting stratified results, and considering how the sample without attention check failures affects overall results and keeping the respondents who failed the attention checks by considering the other aspects such as time taken to fill the survey and answers for the text type questions (Berinsky, Margolis and Sances, 2014, 2016; Varaine, 2023). Each of these strategies has its pros and cons, which need to be carefully evaluated, and ultimately, a strategy should be selected according to the given circumstances. To ensure the negative influence of the inattentive respondents was mitigated without affecting the sample size, for this study, it was decided that respondents who failed the attention checks would be further evaluated by using other criteria such as time taken to fill the questionnaire and answering the text type questions. While there were 11 who had fully or partially failed the attention checks, out of these 11, only one participant could not answer correctly for both the attention checks, filled out the questionnaire by taking unusually little time and did not write any answers for text-type questions. Hence, that response was removed while keeping others as they only failed at one attention check, attended to text-type questions, and took an acceptable time to complete the survey. There were 159 remaining responses; among these respondents, two marked the option “other” for the educational qualifications, and in the text box, they wrote the qualification as MBA. As the questionnaire already had the option of a postgraduate degree, these two responses were marked as postgraduate degrees.

As the forced response option was set up in Qualtrics, there were no missing values when preparing the survey. Skip logic was used to the question "Have you had any previous work experience (PWE)?" and as a result, for those who marked the answer as "No"; a section of questions related to the previous work experience (PWE) was not visible. Thus, the respondents who marked "No" for this screening question had some blank cells related to PWE questions in the dataset. A pairwise deletion approach was used when running SMART PLS to address these missing values. This procedure enabled the case to be excluded when analysing the variable for which missing values are there (in this study, variable PWE) and to be included when analysing other variables with non-missing values (Allison, 2003). This method generates summary estimates by incorporating data from all available cases that offer relevant information for each forecast that will be used for further examination (Newman, 2014).

6.5 Sample Profile

Of the 159 completed questionnaires received, 89% were below the age of 45, and the remaining 11% were above 45. The sample varied in terms of the type of digital businesses, and based on Hull *et al.* (2007) typology of digital businesses, 87% of the respondents had businesses that can be categorised as mild and moderate digital entrepreneurs. The remaining 13% can be categorised as extreme digital entrepreneurs. This reflects the reality in the Sri Lankan context, where most digital entrepreneurs are into selling physical products through digital platforms, and only a few are into making digital products and services. Regarding geographical location, 57% of the respondents live in urban areas, and the remaining 43% live in rural areas. There is a major diversity in the respondents' educational backgrounds, where 25% had GCE A/L or below, 20% were diploma holders, 33% held undergraduate degrees, and the remaining 22% had postgraduate degrees. In terms of income also, there is a variation where 13% received a very low income of below 20000 per month, 17% received an income between Rs 20000 to Rs 60000 per month, 23% received between Rs 60000 - Rs 100000, 26% received between Rs 100000 - Rs 200000, and the remaining 21% received above Rs 200000. Table 6.2 provides an overview of the sample profile.

Table 6.2 Sample Composition

Characteristics		**Count**	**Percentage**
Age	Below 45 years	142	89
	Above 45 years	17	11
			100
Type of Business	Mild and moderate digital Entrepreneurs	138	87
	Extreme digital entrepreneurs	21	13
			100
Geographical Location	Urban	91	57
	Rural	68	43
			100
Level of Education	GCE A/L or below	40	25
	Diploma holders	32	20
	Bachelor's degree holders	52	33
	Postgraduate degrees	35	22
			100
Level of Income	Below Rs 20000	21	13
	Rs 20000 – Rs 60000	27	17
	Rs 60000 - Rs 100000	37	23
	Rs 100000 - Rs 200000	41	26
	Rs 200000	33	21
			100

6.6 Use of SMART PLS for Data Analysis

The collected data was analysed using the partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). SEM is recognised as a better analysis model for understanding complex human behaviours, which are difficult to capture with single relations (Hair *et al.*, 2021). Although this study focusses on a single key outcome variable, the researcher opted to go ahead with SEM instead of an ordered logit or probit approach due to several reasons. Firstly, the SEM allows the simultaneous estimation of multiple relationships among latent constructs and accounts for measurement error, which are beyond the scope of traditional regression models such as ordered logit or probit cannot (Gangl, 2025; Hair *et al.*, 2021). Secondly, SEM enables to test theoretically grounded pathways in an integrated framework by simultaneously estimating direct and indirect effects (Hair *et al.*, 2021). Thirdly, SEM offers model fit indices such as CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR, which evaluate how well the proposed conceptual model corresponds with the observed data. This provides a significant advantage over traditional regression approaches, which do not offer comparable overall model fit assessments. Therefore, it was decided that SEM offers methodological rigor and theoretical coherence consistent with the study's conceptual framework. For the data analysis, the Smart PLS 4 software was used. PLS-SEM has been well-received among present-day social science researchers due to the reasons that it is a nonparametric statistical method, its ability to assess both reflective and formative models, and its ability to be used even with smaller samples (Hair, Ringle and Sarstedt, 2011; Hair *et al.*, 2021). The researcher's objective is to identify key constructs in a complex model with multiple latent variables and relationships while using a relatively smaller sample size, so PLS-SEM was recognised as best serving the purpose of this study. Furthermore, the proposed model requires assessing reflective and formative models, which is possible through PLS-SEM. The SEM is based on survey data, assuming correct model specifications and inclusion of all relevant constructs. To reduce omitted-variable bias, the model was developed based on established theories IDTGIT and intersectionality and insights received from prior empirical studies. Grounding variable selection in strong theoretical reasoning was identified as one of the ways to mitigate the omitted variable bias (Wilms et al., 2021).

Statistical analysis in light of SMART-PLS calls for a two-step approach (Hair and Sarstedt, 2019). First, the measurement model was assessed for its validity and reliability. Second, structural relationships were tested upon confirming the measurement model's validity and reliability. Based on the stepwise guidance given related to the use of SMART PLS in data analysis to validate the measurement model, the outer model of the study was used, and the inner model of the study was used for the structural model analysis (Dash and Paul, 2021; Hair *et al.*, 2021). While the relationship between the observed indicators and the latent constructs was represented through the measurement model, the hypothesised relationships between the constructs were represented through the structural model (Sarstedt and Cheah, 2019).

6.6.1 Validating the Measurement Model

While the measurement model can take the form of either formative or reflective, with the use of SMART-PLS, the researcher has the discretion of assessing both reflective and formative models (Hair, Ringle and Sarstedt, 2011; Sarstedt and Cheah, 2019; Hair *et al.*, 2021). Clear demarcation between the formative and reflective models plays a vital role in deriving the measurement model with precision (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The causality of the reflective measurement models is direct from the latent constructs to indicators, and in the formative measurement models, causality flows from the indicators to the respective latent constructs (Coltman *et al*., 2008). In this study, all the other constructs were reflective except for the "role model" construct. To measure the "role models," measures were adopted from Nowiński and Haddoud (2019), and they explicitly mentioned that "role model" is a formative construct. It is evident that in theoretical form, encountering an entrepreneur within the family, in the university setting, or through the personal network will inspire the individual towards an entrepreneurial pathway and not the other way around. Thus, role models take a formative measurement rather than a reflective one. Composite reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were used when validating the measurement model to assess the reflective model's reliability. On the other hand, the formative measurement model was validated based on convergent validity, indicator collinearity, and the significance and relevance of indicator weights (Hair *et al.*, 2021). Figure 6.3 shows a graphical illustration of the reflective measurement model, and Figure 6.4 shows the formative measurement model produced by the SMART PLS 4. Table 6.3 gives a list of abbreviations used in Figures 6.3 and 6.4.

Table 6.3 List of Abbreviations Used in Figure 6.3

Abbreviation	Meaning
EI	Economic Instability
ATW	Attitude towards Women
FIS	Formal Institutional Support
FS	Family Support
PWE	Previous Work Experience
DSE	Digital Self-efficacy
SR	Need for Self-realisation
FinS	Need for Financial Success
Rec	Need for Recognition
Inn	Need for Innovation
Ind	Need for Independence
RM	Role Model
DEI	Digital Entrepreneurial Intention

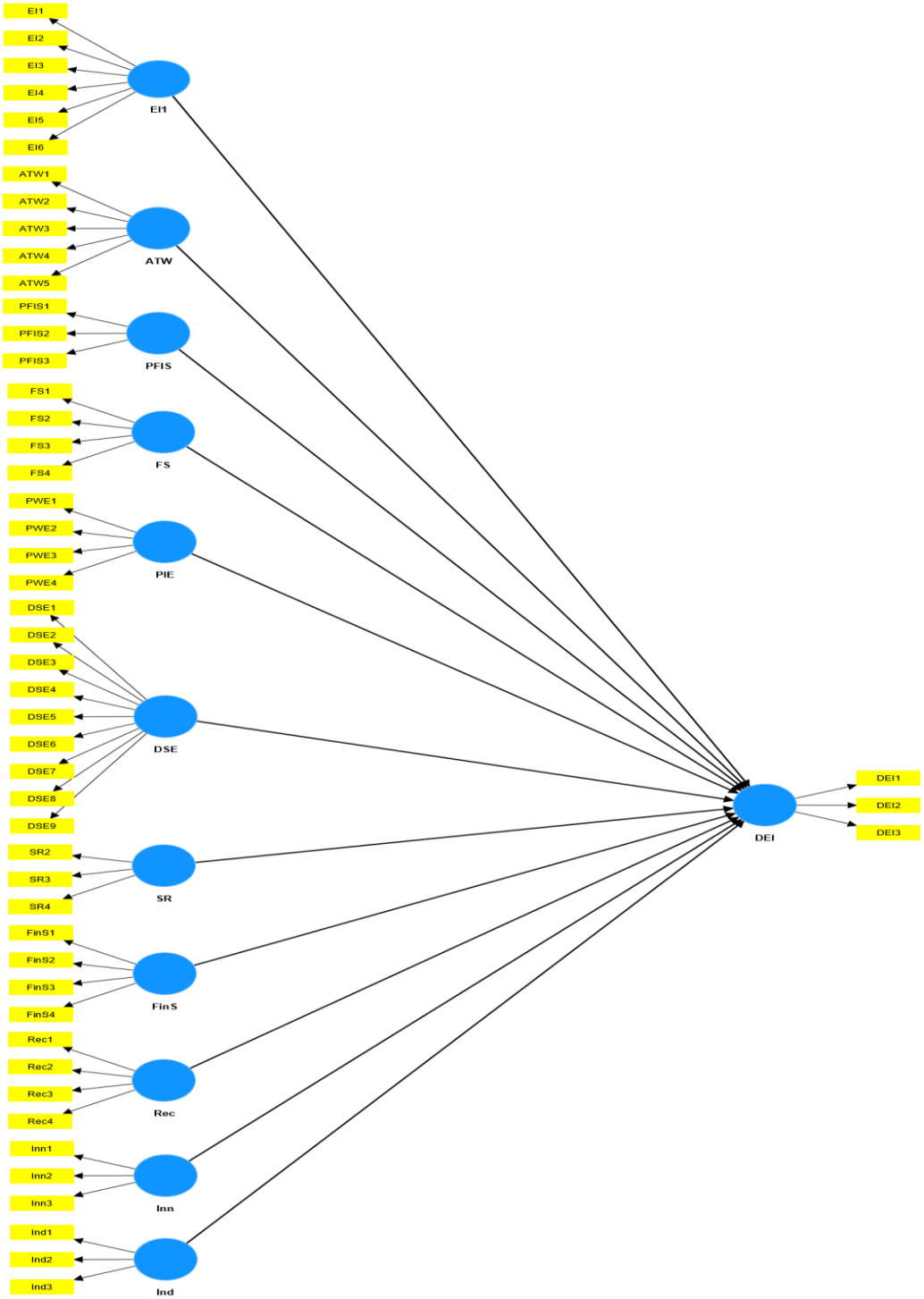

Figure 6.3 Reflective Measurement Model

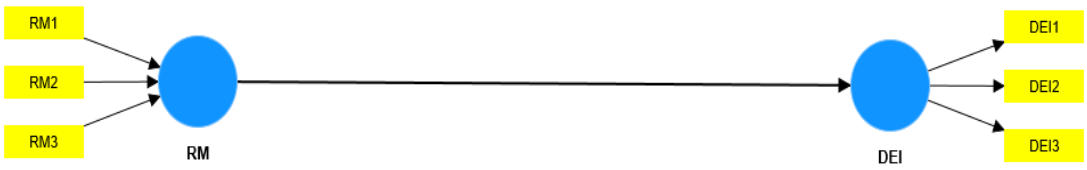

Figure 6.4 Formative Measurement Model

6.6.1.1 Validating the Reflective Measurement Model

As the first step in assessing the reflective measurement model, the outer loadings of the indicators were examined. As per the rule of thumb, the outer loadings should be above 0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2021). Based on the given data set ATW1, ATW5, EI2, EI3, EI4, FinS4, FIS4 had outer loadings below 0.7. However, based on Hair *et al.* (2021), even when outer loadings are between 0.4 and 0.7 if the composite reliability and convergent validity meet the threshold, the researcher can keep the indicator without deleting it. Conversely, if the outer loadings are below 0.4, Hair, Ringle and Sarstedt (2011) emphasised that such an indicator should be removed from the construct. Thus, among the indicators with outer loading below .70, only ATW1, ATW5, and EI3 were deleted while retaining the others, as their outer loadings were between 0.4 and 0.7, and their composite reliability and convergent validity criteria were met. After the necessary eliminations, the items' loadings are shown in Table 6.4.

Table 6.4 Factor Loadings

	ATW	DEI	DSE	EI1	FS	FinS	Ind	Inn	FIS	PWE	Rec	SR
ATW2	0.799											
ATW3	0.834											
ATW4	0.720											
DEI1		0.862										
DEI2		0.908										
DEI3		0.790										
DSE1			0.812									
DSE2			0.771									
DSE3			0.778									
DSE4			0.767									
DSE5			0.848									
DSE6			0.763									
DSE7			0.771									
DSE8			0.709									
DSE9			0.864									
EI1				0.772								
EI2				0.677								
EI4				0.643								
EI5				0.829								
EI6				0.829								
FS1					0.871							
FS2					0.892							
FS3					0.908							
FS4					0.919							
FinS1						0.817						
FinS2						0.878						
FinS3						0.851						

FinS4						0.671						
Ind1							0.876					
Ind2							0.852					
Ind3							0.884					
Inn1								0.799				
Inn2								0.900				
Inn3								0.847				
FIS1									0.719			
FIS2									0.966			
FIS3									0.413			
PWE1										0.742		
PWE2										0.742		
PWE3										0.844		
PWE4										0.843		
Rec1											0.879	
Rec2											0.850	
Rec3											0.800	
Rec4											0.833	
SR2												0.905
SR3												0.853
SR4												0.911

In the second step, the internal consistency reliability was tested using the conventional criterion of Cronbach's alpha and the composite reliability. Composite reliability has been considered a more viable method for evaluating reliability in PLS-SEM as it considers different outer loadings for indicators than assuming all indicators have equivalent outer loadings (which is the assumption of Cronbach alpha) (Hair, Ringle and Sarstedt, 2011; Hair *et al.*, 2021). Based on Hair *et al.* (2021), values ranging between 0.70 and 0.90 are considered satisfactory values for reliability measures, yet values up to 0.95 can also be regarded as desirable. As showcased in Table 6.5, reliability measures for all the constructs are within the accepted range (Cronbach alpha for ATW is also very close to 0.7) thus the internal consistency reliability was accomplished. Upon assessing the reliability, the researcher's efforts were towards determining the convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs. Convergent validity ensures that items used to measure a particular latent variable share common variance to a greater extent, and discriminant validity ensures that the latent constructs are distinctive from each other (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The average variance extracted (AVE) was used to determine the constructs' convergent validity, and the AVE value above 0.5 was considered acceptable (Shinnar, Giacomin and Janssen, 2012; Dash and Paul, 2021; Hair *et al.*, 2021). Based on Table 6.5 AVE values are above 0.5, which showcases the adequacy of convergent validity.

Table 6.5 Convergent Validity and Reliability

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
ATW	0.689	0.828	0.618
DEI	0.816	0.89	0.731
DSE	0.924	0.936	0.621
EI1	0.807	0.867	0.568
FS	0.921	0.943	0.806
FinS	0.826	0.882	0.653
Ind	0.840	0.904	0.758
Inn	0.807	0.886	0.722
FIS	0.733	0.761	0.540

PWE	0.809	0.872	0.631
Rec	0.863	0.906	0.707
SR	0.868	0.919	0.792

As the next step, efforts were driven towards establishing discriminant validity. While the Fornell-Larcker criterion has been the conventional criterion to assess discriminant validity, SMART-PLS widely accepts the use of HTMT as a more reliable criterion for determining the discriminant validity of reflective models (Hair *et al.*, 2021). The given study established discriminant validity through the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the HTMT matrix. Based on the Fornell–Larcker criterion, the latent construct is expected to share significant variance with its indicators compared to the other latent constructs in the model (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Therefore, statistically, the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct is expected to exceed the highest correlation between that construct and any other construct. Table 6.6 represents the confirmation of this requirement. Based on the extant literature, HTMT values below the threshold value of 0.85 suggest discriminant validity (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). Discriminant validity is also warranted based on the HTMT matrix and the results showcased in Table 6.6.

Table 6.6 Discriminant Validity based on Fornell and Lacker Criterion

	ATW	DEI	DSE	EI1	FS	FinS	Ind	Inn	FIS	PWE	Rec	SR
ATW	0.786											
DEI	0.406	0.855										
DSE	0.281	0.598	0.788									
EI1	-0.155	-0.493	-0.443	0.754								
FS	0.019	0.377	0.221	-0.199	0.898							
FinS	0.139	0.39	0.431	-0.313	0.332	0.808						
Ind	0.194	0.478	0.43	-0.331	0.436	0.369	0.871					
Inn	0.238	0.587	0.589	-0.499	0.22	0.519	0.375	0.85				
FIS	-0.133	-0.208	-0.192	0.278	0.002	-0.215	-0.218	-0.327	0.735			
PWE	0.098	0.275	0.475	-0.384	0.142	0.258	0.204	0.396	-0.062	0.795		
Rec	0.288	0.484	0.538	-0.41	0.293	0.557	0.364	0.587	-0.261	0.386	0.841	
SR	0.222	0.59	0.602	-0.577	0.318	0.587	0.505	0.734	-0.379	0.336	0.601	0.890

HTMT Matrix

Table 6.7 Discriminant Validity based on HTMT Matrix

	ATW	DEI	DSE	EI1	FS	FinS	Ind	Inn	FIS	PWE	Rec	SR
ATW												
DEI		0.536										
DSE		0.349	0.672									
EI1		0.211	0.593	0.514								
FS		0.118	0.428	0.22	0.216							
FinS		0.184	0.45	0.473	0.363	0.361						
Ind		0.261	0.574	0.488	0.399	0.493	0.43					
Inn		0.314	0.711	0.672	0.61	0.239	0.632	0.453				
FIS		0.183	0.213	0.144	0.338	0.09	0.183	0.21	0.271			

PWE	0.155	0.32	0.547	0.453	0.165	0.285	0.238	0.469	0.168		
Rec	0.377	0.577	0.598	0.474	0.311	0.65	0.42	0.705	0.21	0.454	
SR	0.291	0.694	0.662	0.684	0.341	0.679	0.589	0.873	0.299	0.399	0.687

Thereafter, multicollinearity issues were checked with the variance inflation factors (VIF) to find the presence of any highly intercorrelated indicators. The threshold VIF value was 5, where VIF values below 5 suggest no major collinearity issues (Nowiński and Haddoud, 2019; Hair *et al.*, 2021).

6.6.1.2 Validating Formative Measurement Model

Determining the quality of the formative measurement model differs from the reflective measurement model evaluation. Unlike in the reflective measurement model, it is not expected to have a high correlation between indicators of the constructs, and composite reliability becomes redundant as formative indicators are expected to be free from measurement error (Hair *et al.*, 2021). Assessment of the formative measurement model requires examining the convergent validity, multicollinearity issues, and the significance and relevance of the indicator weights (Sarstedt and Cheah, 2019; Hair *et al.*, 2021). Calculated values of the above criterion were given in Table 6.8.

Table 6.8 Validating the Formative Measurement Model

	Significance of outer weights	T-statistics	Significance of outer loadings	Outer loadings	VIF
RM1 -> RM	0.152	1.028	0.152	-0.293	1.736
RM2 -> RM	0.177	0.925	0.177	-0.207	1.809
RM3 -> RM	0.120	1.173	0.120	0.516	1.842

Based on the results, all three indicators have a VIF less than the threshold of 5 (Hair *et al*., 2011). VIF values below 5 illustrate the absence of multicollinearity problems where the formative indicators used to define a latent construct exhibit low intercorrelations with each other. Following the multicollinearity testing, the statistical significance and relevance of the indicator weights were assessed. Figure 6.5 showcases the decision-making process related to the retention or removal of the formative indicators.

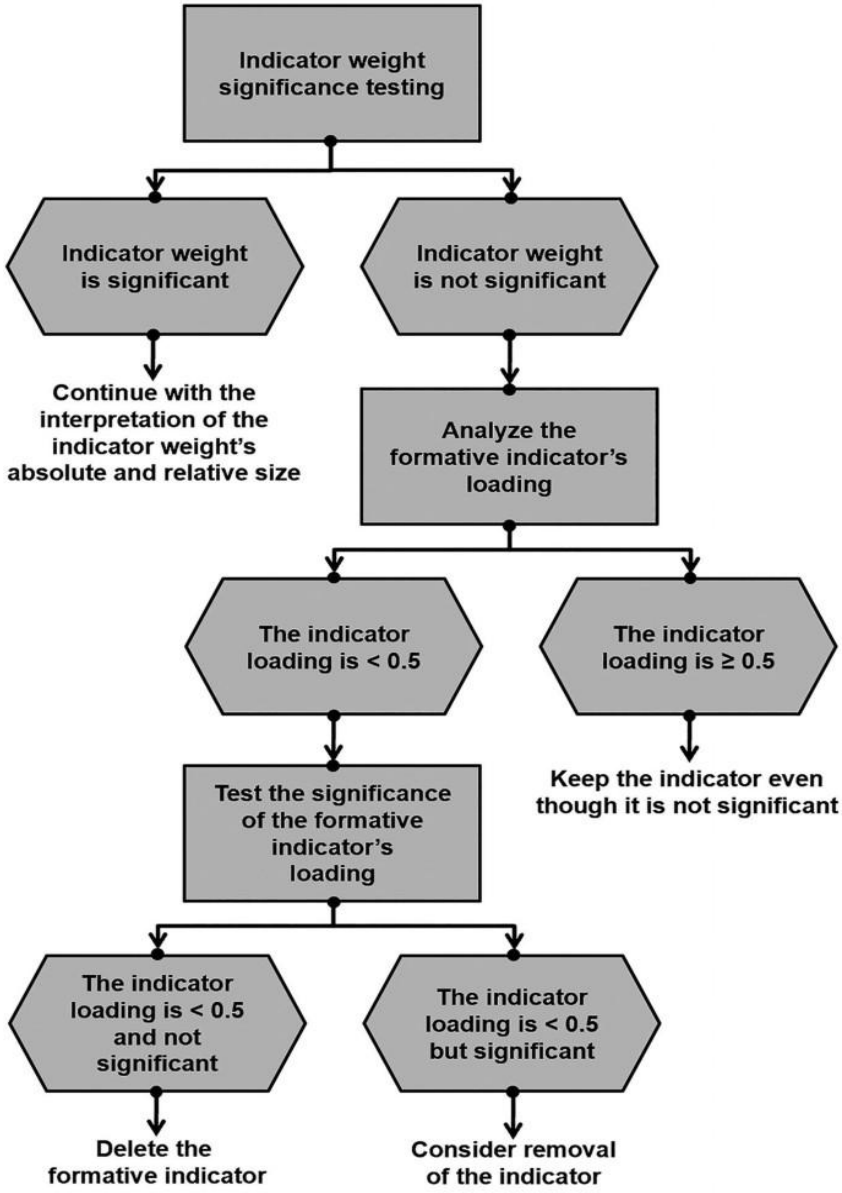

Figure 6.5 Decision-Making Process Related to Validating Formative Indicators

Source: Figure illustrating the decision-making process for keeping or deleting formative indicators (Hair *et al.*, 2021, p. 152, Exhibit 5.7)

Based on Table 6.8, all three indicator weights are insignificant; thus, indicator loadings were considered and turned out to be less than 0.5. This required looking at the significance of indicator loadings, which came out as insignificant. Since all the necessary criteria failed, retaining all three formative indicators was no longer tenable. While statistical outcomes showcase the importance of removing the formative indicators, these indicators should never be removed purely based on statistical outcomes. Especially in the given context, clearing all three indicators removes the whole construct of "role model," which was theoretically recognised as a key variable. As the decision to remove the entire variable should be made with utmost care, prior to removing the variable "role model," empirical evidence available thus far was taken into account. At the preliminary informal interviews, both the female digital entrepreneurs emphasised that they do not have any experience with role models. Further, they explicitly mentioned that even those few successful female digital entrepreneurs hesitate to engage as role models for other women, as they perceive new entrants as threats. Thus, considering the statistical outcomes and the available empirical evidence, the role model construct was removed from the quantitative data analysis. However, given the imperative nature of "role model" as a variable in entrepreneurial intention literature (BarNir, Watson and Hutchins, 2011; Nowiński and Haddoud, 2019; Wannamakok and Chang, 2020), despite this contradictory finding, an in-depth exploration of the role models was undertaken in the qualitative study.

6.6.2 Statistical Concerns for Common Method Bias

The researcher was well aware of common method bias (CMB) due to using a single instrument to assess the whole set of variables. Therefore, as Kock, Berbekova, and Assaf (2021) emphasised, both procedural and statistical controls were used to alleviate the adverse consequences of CMB. While the procedural concerns undertaken were already discussed in the research methodology chapter, statistical controls for CMB are discussed here. In this study, to statistically test the CMB more rigorously, a full collinearity test (Kock, 2015) and a measured latent marker variable (MLMV) test (Chin et al., 2013) was performed. Based on Kock (2015), the full collinearity test was recognised as a holistic approach to test the collinearity, allowing vertical

and lateral collinearity to be assessed simultaneously. It is concluded that VIF values equal to or greater than 3.3 showcase the existence of CMB (Kock, 2015; Kock, Berbekova, and Assaf, 2021). As showcased in Table 6.9, VIF values are below 3.3, confirming that CMB is not a pivotal issue in this study.

Table 6.9 Colinearity Test

Relationship	**VIF Value**
ATW -> DEI	1.150
DSE -> DEI	2.057
EI -> DEI	1.646
FS -> DEI	1.354
FinS -> DEI	1.783
Ind -> DEI	1.603
Inn -> DEI	2.731
FIS -> DEI	1.239
PWE -> DEI	1.439
RM -> DEI	1.158
Rec -> DEI	2.072
SR -> DEI	3.336

(ATW-Attitude towards Women, DEI - Digital Entrepreneurial Intention, EI- Economic Instability, DSE - Digital Self-efficacy, FS - Family Support, FIS, Formal Institutional Support, FinS - Need for Financial Success, Ind - Need for Independence, Inn - Need for Innovation, PWE - Previous Work Experience, RM - Role Model, Rec - Need for Recognition, SR - Need for Self-realisation)

Upon testing the presence of CMB by using the full collinearity test, the MLMV test proposed by Chin *et al.* (2013) was conducted to determine the presence of CMB. MLMV is recognised as an effective technique for testing the presence of CMB in PLS-based data analysis (Tehseen, Ramayah, and Sajilan, 2017). "Focused immersion," a conceptually unrelated construct, was added to the questionnaire as a marker variable, and the data were collected. As it was expected that there is no relationship between the marker variable and substantive variables, the presence of the CMB can be determined by assessing the correlation between the marker variable and theoretically substantive variables of the model (Chin *et al.,* 2013; Sarfo *et al.,* 2024). Thus, if the marker variable shows a significant correlation with the substantive constructs of the study, it indicates the presence of CMB. Further, if path coefficients between exogenous and endogenous variables significantly change when the effect of the marker variable is introduced to each variable,

it can be concluded that CMB is present. Tables and graphical illustrations related to the MLMV test are given below.

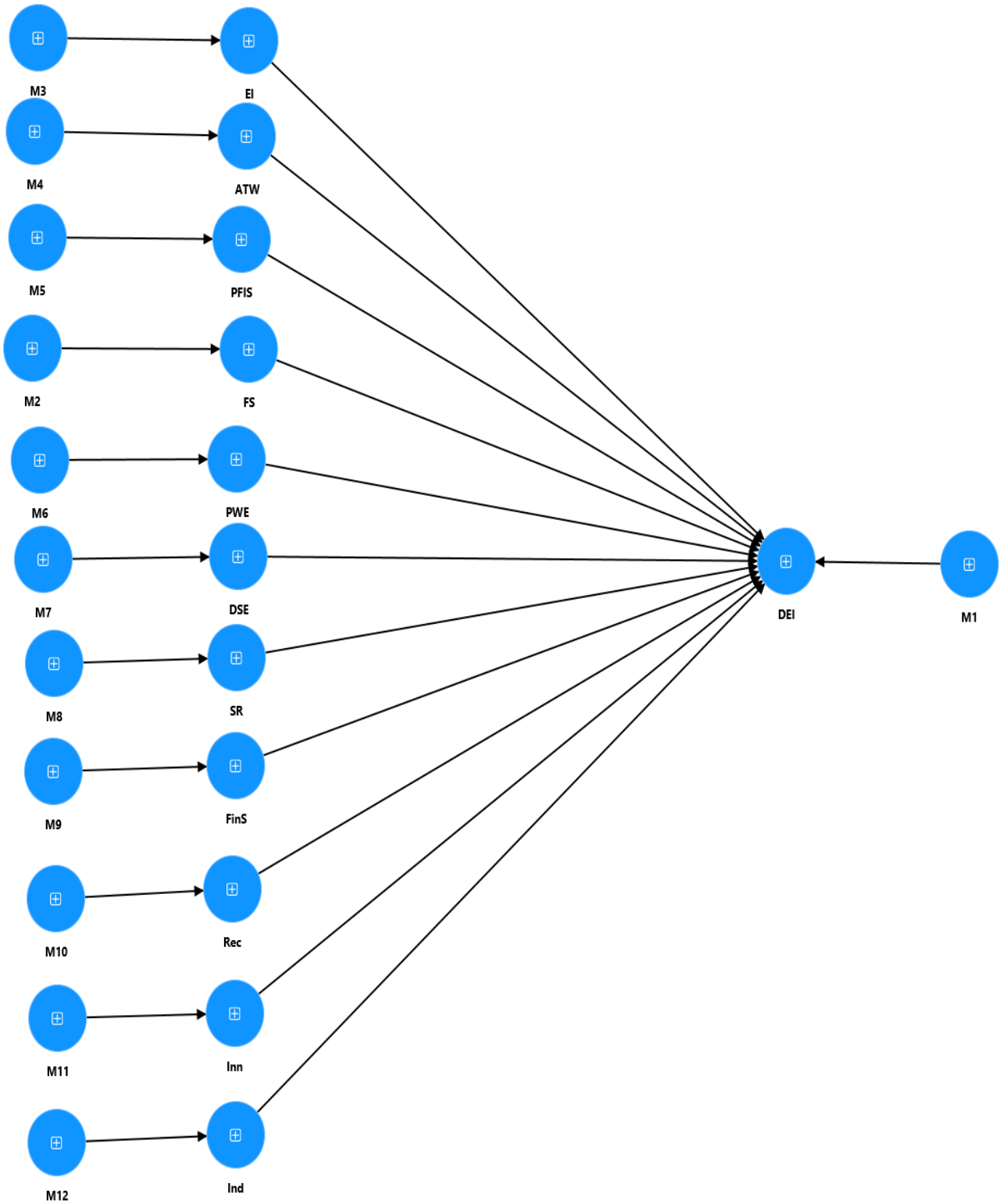

Figure 6.6 MLMV Test

Table 6.10 MLMV Test

	Base Line Model			Marker Variable Model		
	Path Coefficients	Standard Deviation	P Values	Path Coefficients	Standard Deviation	Significance
ATW -> DEI	0.232	0.072	0.001	0.234	0.068	0.000
DSE -> DEI	0.266	0.100	0.004	0.260	0.099	0.004
EI -> DEI	0.174	0.077	0.012	0.168	0.077	0.014
FS -> DEI	0.196	0.071	0.003	0.191	0.069	0.003
FinS -> DEI	-0.049	0.079	0.270	-0.033	0.075	0.330
Ind -> DEI	0.091	0.094	0.167	0.097	0.09	0.143
Inn -> DEI	0.219	0.112	0.025	0.201	0.107	0.031
FIS -> DEI	0.011	0.066	0.431	0.029	0.063	0.323
PWE -> DEI	-0.088	0.072	0.112	-0.081	0.072	0.132
Rec -> DEI	-0.010	0.101	0.463	0.017	0.098	0.433
SR -> DEI	0.073	0.128	0.286	0.064	0.097	0.254
M1 -> DEI						0.421
M10 -> Rec						0.000
M11 -> Inn						0.000
M12 -> Ind						0.000
M2 -> FS						0.008
M3 -> EI						0.005
M4 -> ATW						0.017
M5 -> FIS						0.267
M6 -> PWE						0.000
M7 -> DSE						0.001
M8 -> SR						0.000
M9 -> FinS						0.000
M10 -> Rec						0.000

(ATW-Attitude towards Women, DEI - Digital Entrepreneurial Intention, EI- Economic Instability, DSE - Digital Self-efficacy, FS - Family Support, FIS, Formal Institutional Support, FinS - Need for Financial Success, Ind - Need for Independence, Inn - Need for Innovation, PWE - Previous Work Experience, RM - Role Model, Rec - Need for Recognition, SR - Need for Self-realisation, M{n} – Marker Variables)

As shown in Table 6.10 above, except for variables FIS and DEI for all the other substantive variables, the marker variable shows a significant relationship, indicating the possibility of CMB's presence. However, Chin *et al.* (2013) emphasised that the presence of substantial common method bias cannot be determined purely on the grounds that the relationship between marker variables and substantive variables is significant, and it is imperative to compare path coefficients, standard deviations, and P values of the baseline model with the MLMV model.

When comparing the path coefficient, standard deviations, and P values, it is clear that the estimated values for the baseline model are not significantly different from those estimated for the MLMV model; thus, it was concluded that CMB has no significant effect on the outcomes of this study (Chin *et al.,* 2013).

Validating the Higher-Order Construct

In light of the extant literature, internal motivation was recognised as a higher-order construct formed by five lower-order components: self-realisation, recognition, innovation, independence, and financial success. Extant literature substantiates that motivations for entrepreneurship are complex and intertwined, where multiple motives together drive the entrepreneurial journey (Mallon and Cohen, 2001; Kirkwood and Campbell-Hunt, 2007; Kirkwood, 2009). As these motivational factors are not mutually exclusive, to capture internal motivation in a more holistic manner, it was taken up as a compound factor where five motivational factors, namely desire for self-realisation, financial success, innovation, recognition, and independence (Carter *et al.*, 2007; Edelman *et al.*, 2010) were taken up as sub-dimensions. The ability to handle higher-order constructs effectively compared to conventional statistical modelling techniques is one of the biggest advantages of the SMART PLS (Ringle *et al.*, 2019). Using SMART PLS hierarchical component models, researchers can craft a construct on a more abstract dimension called higher-order constructs and its precise subdimensions called lower-order constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2021). In the given context, deriving internal motivation as a higher-order construct aligns with the extant literature (Kirkwood, 2009). Also, as Edwards (2001) emphasised, it helps craft a parsimonious model with a reduced number of structural path relationships. For instance, as the hard-to-reach sample confines the sample size of this study, having excessive path relationships could result in Type II errors. Thus, taking up internal motives as a higher-order construct that reduces the structural pathways is imperative in the given context.

There are four types of higher-order constructs, namely reflective, formative; reflective, reflective; formative, formative; and formative, reflective. These four types are determined based on the nature of the relationships between the indicators (observed variables) and the latent variables for both higher-order and lower-order components (Hair *et al.*, 2021). In light of the

given literature, internal motivation is a reflective-formative construct. When looking at the second-order constructs, self-realisation, recognition, innovation, independence, and financial success are modelled as reflective constructs, as increases or decreases in these constructs were reflected through indicators. For instance, when taking the construct "recognition," achieving a higher position for oneself in society, among friends and family, reflects high recognition. The higher-order construct of internal motivation can be considered a formative construct as it is caused by multiple motivations (Kirkwood, 2009). Thus, in the given context, a higher-order construct took the form of reflective formative.

Estimating the higher-order constructs in SMART PLS is done through two approaches, namely the repeated indicators approach and the two-stage approach (Hair *et al.*, 2021). Researchers can proceed with either approach as both are recognised as viable pathways producing almost indistinguishable results (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2019). Many studies relied on a two-stage approach for higher-order constructs (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2019), and the two-stage approach was parsimonious due to the incorporation of higher-order constructs separately and sequentially (Becker, Klein and Wetzels, 2012). Therefore, a disjointed two-stage approach was used for this study as well, and the values are given in Table 6.11.

Table 6.11 Validation Indicators for Higher-Order Constructs in SMART-PLS

Higher Order Construct (HoC)	Lower Order Constructs (LoCs)	Outer Weights	T Stats	P Values	VIF	Outer Loadings
Internal Motivation	SR	0.053	13.234	0.000	2.843	0.879
	Rec	0.123	6.913	0.000	1.842	0.721
	FinS	0.307	5.067	0.000	1.715	0.581
	Inn	0.005	11.047	0.000	2.349	0.874
	Ind	0.011	5.981	0.000	1.362	0.712

(FinS - Need for Financial Success, Ind - Need for Independence, Inn - Need for Innovation, Rec - Need for Recognition, SR - Need for Self-realisation, M{n} – Marker Variables)

Validating the higher-order construct required establishing a higher-order measurement model by using the construct scores of the lower-order components as the indicators of the higher-

order construct. To validate the higher-order model, researchers expected to use the same model evaluation criteria applied for measurement validation in SMART PLS. As a result, to evaluate the higher-order construct, the researcher used the same evaluation criterion used to validate the formative measurement model. While outer weights are significant for innovation and independence and partially significant for self-realisation, these are insignificant for recognition and financial success. Outer loadings for all the lower-order constructs, which act as indicators for higher-order constructs, are above 0.5, and multicollinearity issues were not evident as the VIF values are below 5. Higher-order construct validity was established since all criteria were met by meeting the statistical threshold values (Hair *et al.*, 2021). Upon the validation of the measurement model, the ultimate structural path model is established based on the conceptual framework.

6.6.3 Structural Model Evaluation

Structural linkages between the latent variables were hypothesised based on the Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT (IDTGIT), where these structural relationships were empirically tested at this stage. Based on the recommendations of Hair *et al.* (2021), the significance of path coefficients was assessed using bootstrapping, where 10000 bootstrap samples were used. Path coefficients and their statistical significance related to the direct relationships were presented in Table 6.12

Table 6.12 Testing the Direct Relationships

	Beta Coefficient	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values
EI -> DEI	0.171	0.074	2.306	0.011
ATW -> DEI	0.190	0.071	2.687	0.004
FIS -> DEI	0.062	0.062	0.993	0.160
FS -> DEI	0.158	0.073	2.170	0.015
PWE -> DEI	-0.081	0.076	1.061	0.144
DSE -> DEI	0.288	0.145	1.990	0.023
Internal Motivation -> DEI	0.312	0.153	2.039	0.021
MaritalStatus_Divorced -> DEI	-0.190	0.384	0.495	0.310
MaritalStatus_Single -> DEI	-0.303	0.157	1.929	0.027
Income -> DEI	-0.050	0.067	0.740	0.230
Education -> DEI	-0.077	0.066	1.171	0.121
Geography -> DEI	0.002	0.112	0.022	0.491

(ATW-Attitude towards Women, DEI - Digital Entrepreneurial Intention, EI- Economic Instability, DSE - Digital Self-efficacy, FS - Family Support, FIS, Formal Institutional Support, PWE - Previous Work Experience)

In light of the analysis, 06 out of the 11 hypothesised direct relationships were accepted, as given in the table 6.12 below. Based on the data analysis related to direct relationships, *economic instability, attitude towards women, family support, DSE, and internal motives were recognised as factors that positively influence women's participation in FDE*. Converse to the expectations, *FIS and PWE did not emerge as significant factors affecting women's participation in FDE*. Among the demographic factors, *only the relationship between marital status and DEI was found to be positive,* whereas the relationship between other demographic factors, namely socioeconomic status, education and income, and DEI, was not supported. Marital status is a categorical predictor variable (with more than two options), which calls for a comparison of marital status on entrepreneurial intention. Thus, "divorce" and "single" were taken as dummy variables, which

were compared with "married". The relationship between digital entrepreneurial intention and being single was negative and significant (β=-0.303, P=0.027), where a negative β value suggests that the DEI among single women is weaker than married women. Furthermore, based on the findings, there is no relationship between being "divorced" and digital entrepreneurial intention (β=-0.190, P=0.310). Thus, when taking these statistical results, it is evident that *married women exhibit a higher intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship than single women* in the Sri Lankan context.

Table 6.13 Testing of Hypothesis Related to Direct Relationships

h1	Economic instability positively influences women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Accepted
h2	Attitudes about women in the workforce positively influence women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Accepted
h3	Perceived formal institutional support exerts a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Rejected
h5	Family support exerts a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Accepted
h6	Previous work experiences exert a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Rejected
h7	Digital self-efficacy exerts a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Accepted
h9	Internal motivation exerts a positive influence towards women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Accepted
h10	Married women exhibit a higher intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Accepted
H11	High socioeconomic status exerts a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka.	Rejected

H12	Educational attainment exerts a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka.	Rejected
H13	Living in an urban area exerts a positive influence towards women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka.	Rejected

Based on the theoretical perspective of intersectionality, women's experiences in the digital entrepreneurial arena may depend on many other social ascriptions beyond their gender. To explore the extent to which critical social ascriptions strengthen or weaken the relationship between internal motivation and digital entrepreneurial intention, geographical location and marital status were tested as moderators. While popular discourse favours that digital platforms enable women to elevate the geographical barriers, thereby heightening their motives to run a digital venture, this notion was empirically tested in the given context of Sri Lanka, where the digital divide is expected to be pronounced based on geographical location (Hewage, 2017). Similarly, the nexus between the household and entrepreneurship was apparent for female entrepreneurs (Jayawarna, Swail and Marlow, 2017); marital status was also tested as a predictor and a moderator variable. Moderating effects of marital status and geographical location were hypothesised priori based on the extant literature and specifically tested. The study also assessed the moderating effect of the "fear of failure" on the relationship between digital self-efficacy (DSE) and entrepreneurial intention, which was also empirically tested.

The moderators are categorical moderator variables, where geographic location and fear of failure were dichotomous, where each group was coded with 0 and 1, respectively. However, the categorical variable marital status has three groups, namely "single," "married," and "divorced." According to Hair *et al.* (2021) when three groups are present, it is required to split up the moderator into two binary (dummy) variables, where both these dummy-coded variables would take the value zero for the chosen reference category. Based on this study, "single" and "divorced" were concurrently included in the model, which was compared with the reference category "married".

To assess the significance of the moderating impact, the variation in R^2 values was determined for the model, excluding the moderator variables and including the moderator effects

(Hair *et al.*, 2021). If the moderating effects of an overall model do not increase the R^2, it is not worthwhile to incorporate the moderating effects for a model. Excluding the moderating effects, R^2 was 0.597, and with the inclusion of the moderating effect, it increased to 0.621. The f2 effect size of the interaction effect is another value that plays a prominent role in moderation effect analysis, and based on this study, the f2 effect size is 0.06, which is considered a large effect size. The significance of the moderating effect is presented in Table 6.14

Table 6.14 Testing the Moderators

	Beta Coefficient	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values
FF x DSE -> DEI	0.027	0.137	0.194	0.423
MaritalStatus_Single x Motives -> DEI	-0.285	0.168	1.697	0.045
MaritalStatus_Divorced x Motives -> DEI	-0.16	0.331	0.485	0.314
Geography x Motives -> DEI	0.264	0.120	2.189	0.014

(FF - Fear of Failure, DEI - Digital Entrepreneurial Intention, DSE - Digital Self-efficacy)

The statistical data revealed that *fear of failure does not moderate the relationship between digital self-efficacy and women's digital entrepreneurial intention (β=0.027, P=0.423)*. When it comes to *marital status, it was evident that the nexus between women's internal motivation and digital entrepreneurial intention is moderated by marital status. The data analysis showed that being married strengthens the relationship between the women's internal motivation and their digital entrepreneurial intention when compared to being single (β=-0.285, P=0.045).* Based on the statistical analysis, the effect of being divorced was revealed to have no impact on the relationship between internal motivation and the digital entrepreneurial intention of women (β=-160, P=0.314). It was also proved that the *relationship between internal motivation and intention is moderated by geographical location (β=0.264, P=0.014). This indicates that the women's internal motivation towards engaging in female digital entrepreneurship is further strengthened if*

they live in a urban area compared to a rural area. Table 6.15 showcases the hypotheses related to the moderating effect.

Table 6.15 Testing of Hypothesis Related to Moderator Relationships

H8	The fear of failure moderates the positive relationship between digital self-efficacy and women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka	Rejected
H14	Marital status moderates the positive relationship between internal motivation and women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka	Accepted
H15	Geographic location moderates the positive relationship between internal motivation and women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka	Accepted

Furthermore, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the moderator analysis, a simple slope analysis (Hair *et al.*, 2021) was conducted for those moderator effects, which turned out to be significant. Based on the simple slope analysis, a flatter slope represents a lower level of moderator while a steeper slope represents a high level of moderator effect (Hair *et al.*, 2021). Graphs on simple slope analysis for the marital status and geographical location were performed. Figures 6.7 and 6.8 showcase these graphs.

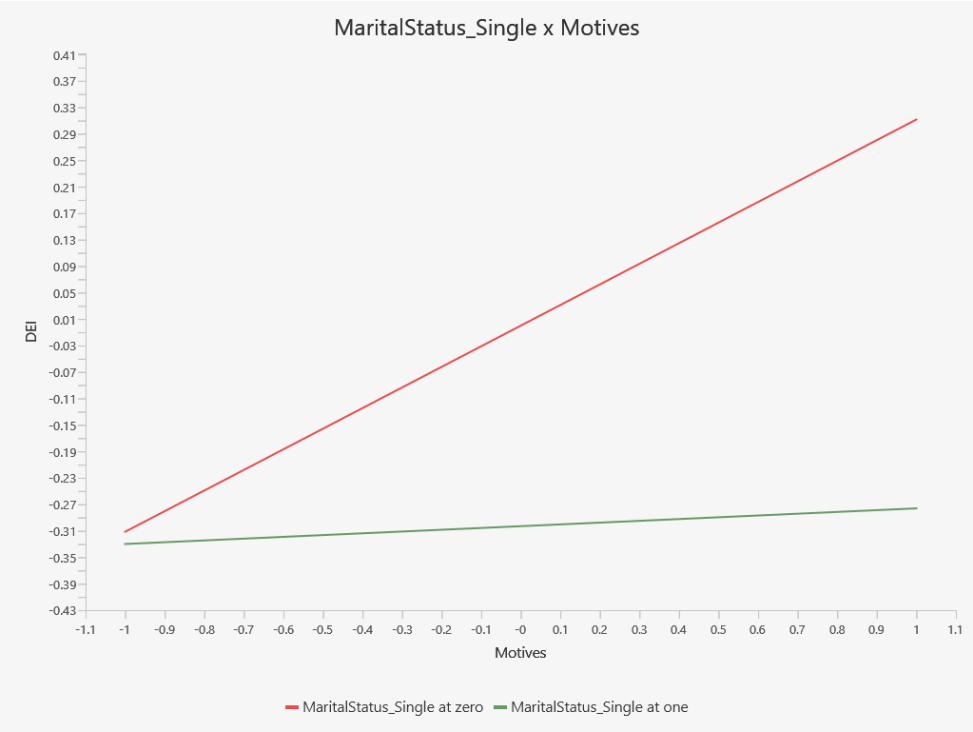

Figure 6.7 Simple Slope Analysis for Marital Status as a Moderator

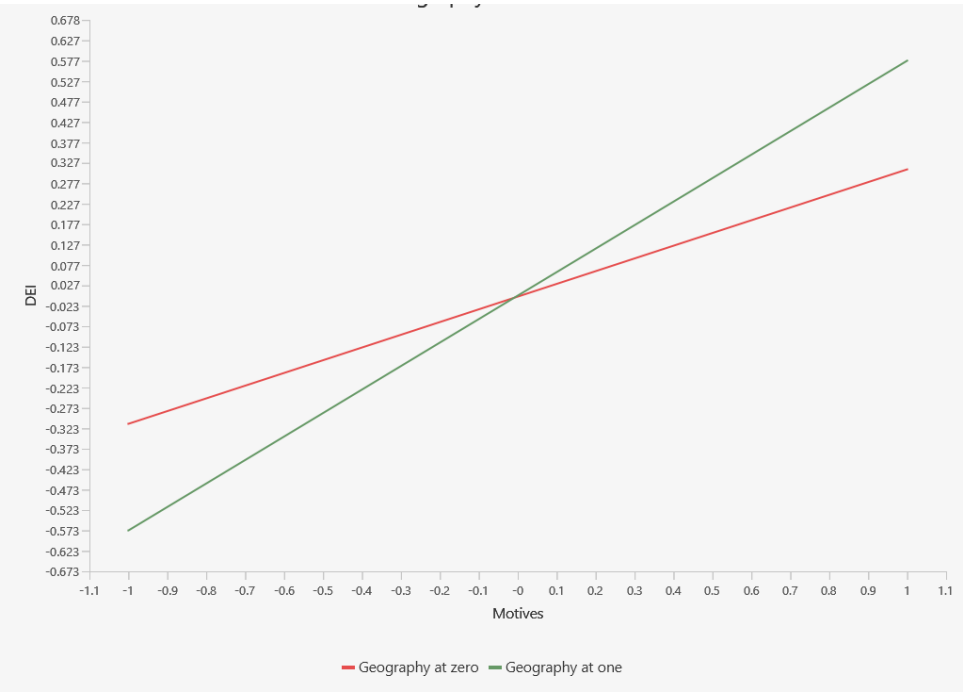

Figure 6.8 Simple Slope Analysis for Geographic Location as a Moderator

As shown in Figure 6.8, the line is steeper for married women compared to single (when marital status_single at zero), suggesting that being married strengthens the relationship between internal motives and FDE intention. Adding on, the line that showcases living in an urban area (geography at one, where one stands for urban areas) is steeper when compared to the rural area, reflecting that living in a rural area tends to strengthen the relationship between women's internal motivation and digital entrepreneurial intention when compared to living in an urban area.

6.6.4 Summary of the Hypotheses Testing

Quantitative data analysis was conducted to address the first two research objectives of the study, namely, exploring the factors that drive women's participation in digital entrepreneurship and examining how intersectional differences may influence their pathway to FDE. The proposed model was statistically tested using the SEM-PLS with the aid of SMART PLS4 software. First, the researcher validated the measurement model, and all the constructs met the threshold criterion related to validity and reliability except for the "Role Model." Carefully evaluating the outcomes of the data analysis with the findings derived from the preliminary interviews, it was decided to remove the construct "Role Models" from the model. After determining the validity of the model, the researcher moved on to hypothesis testing. A total of 15 hypotheses were tested, out of which 08 were accepted. Next the direct relationships were tested, and based on the data analysis, environmental factors, namely economic instability and attitude towards women; individual influences, namely family support, DSE, and internal motivations; and individual identity factors, namely marital status, are recognised to provide positive influence towards women's participation in FDE. Contrary to the initial expectations, some hypotheses were rejected, warranting a deep exploration to unearth the contextual conditions behind the unexpected results. The impact of the environmental factor- formal institutional support, individual influence factor-previous work experience, and individual identity factors-high socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and geographical location, on women's participation in FDE were not supported. After testing the direct relationships, moderators were tested. Based on the findings, it was identified that being married and living in a rural area moderate the relationship between internal motives and women's intention to engage in FDE. However, the hypothesised moderating effect of fear of failure on the relationship between DSE and intention to engage in FDE was rejected. Overall, testing hypotheses

enabled identifying those factors that drive FDE in the Sri Lankan context, and it enabled the attainment of valuable insights on how intersectional dynamics influence FDE.

6.7 Conclusion

Quantitative data analysis procedure and findings derived through the data analysis were elaborated upon in this chapter. The chapter began by restating the purpose of the study and providing a brief overview of the methodology. This was followed by the researcher's reflections on the survey, emphasising the challenges the researcher had to go through, and the strategies used to overcome them. Thereafter, the data screening process and the sample characteristics were elaborated upon. Ultimately, the data analysis through SMART-PLS was explained in detail. Validating the measurement model and testing hypotheses through the structural model was sequentially explained. The main findings of the study are compiled below in Table 6.16.

Table 6.16 Summary of Quantitative Findings

H1	Economic instability positively influences women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Accepted
H2	Attitudes about women in the workforce positively influence women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Accepted
H3	Perceived formal institutional support exerts a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Rejected
H5	Family support exerts a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Accepted
H6	Previous work experiences exert a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Rejected
H7	Digital self-efficacy exerts a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Accepted

H9	Internal motivation exerts a positive influence towards women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Accepted
H10	Married women exhibit a higher intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context.	Accepted
H11	High socioeconomic status exerts a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka.	Rejected
H12	Educational attainment exerts a positive influence on women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka.	Rejected
H13	Living in an urban area exerts a positive influence towards women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka.	Rejected
H8	The fear of failure moderates the positive relationship between digital self-efficacy and women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka	Rejected
H14	Marital status moderates the positive relationship between internal motivation and women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka	Accepted
H15	Geographic location moderates the positive relationship between internal motivation and women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka	Accepted

Chapter Seven

Qualitative Analysis

Chapter 7: Qualitative Analysis

7.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on presenting the qualitative data analysis conducted by the researcher based on the data collected from the semi-structured interviews with female digital entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka. Qualitative analysis will be conducted with three foremost aims, viz, a deep delve into the change factors that influence women to conduct digital businesses; explore how the intersectionality of multiple social ascriptions shapes female digital entrepreneurial journey; and investigate whether FDE solidified social changes that impact the uplifting of women's conditions. The chapter will commence with reflections based on data collection, outlines of the qualitative data analysis procedures, emphasising sample profile and data validation procedures. The chapter will then discuss the main findings from qualitative analysis. At the end of the chapter, quantitative and qualitative data analysis outcomes will be integrated to provide a cohesive interpretation by synthesising the insights. The structure of the chapter will be outlined below in Figure 7.1.

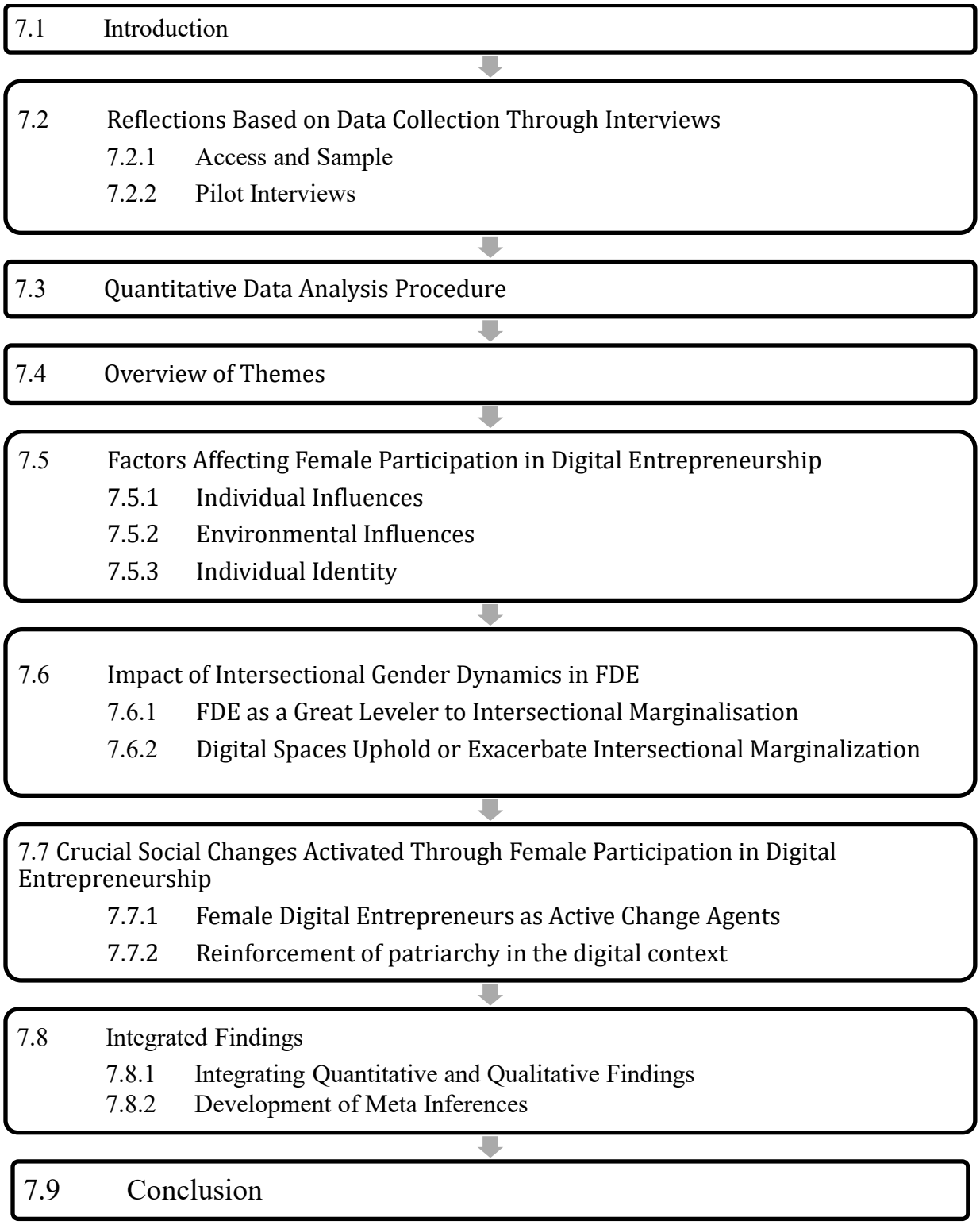

Figure 7.1 Chapter Structure

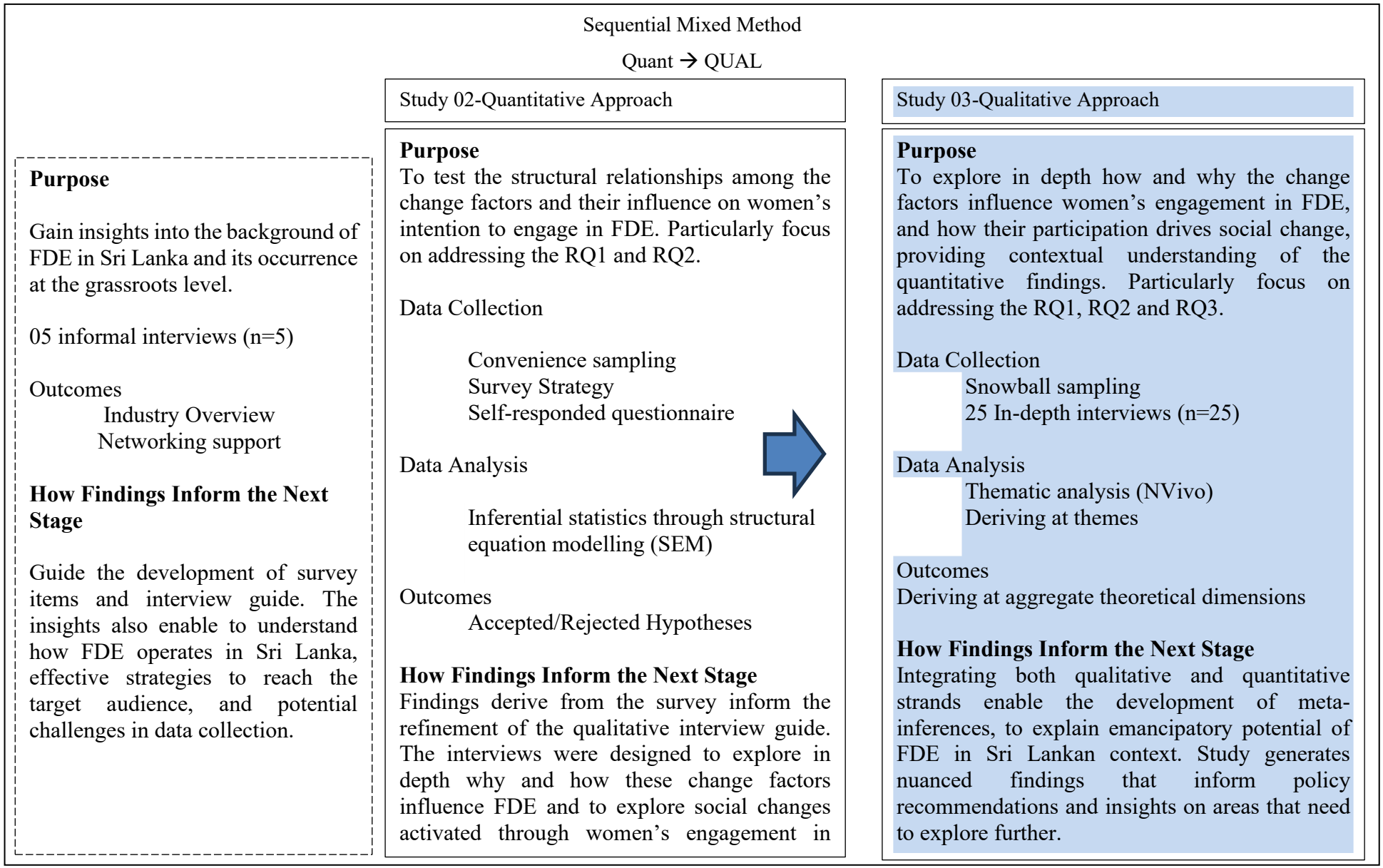

Figure 7.2 Road Map of the Study

7.2 Reflections Based on Data Collection Through Interviews

7.2.1 Access the Sample

A total of twenty-five interviews were conducted, including two pilot interviews from a sample selected based on the convenience sampling with purposive eligibility criteria. Participants were selected based on three criteria, namely (1) women who individually or jointly initiated and ran a business that relies partially or wholly on the Internet (e.g., businesses such as selling products through social networking sites, online tutoring, developing apps and software, providing consultancy and other services digitally) (2) are a Sri Lankan citizen (3) businesses that are operating for more than two years. When selecting the sample, the researcher put effort into capturing the heterogeneity of what constitutes FDE businesses, as Hull *et al.*, (2007) definition of digital entrepreneurship covers a broader spectrum of businesses that use digital technology to different degrees. However, the scarcity of full-time female digital entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka constrained the researcher's capacity to choose a fully heterogeneous sample.

The researcher anticipated the challenges of finding appropriate participants for the study due to the scarcity of female digital entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka and people's general reluctance towards sparing their time on interviews for which they are not getting any visible benefits. Therefore, the researcher worked on maintaining a good rapport with key stakeholders in the FDE sector, where she managed to use personal networks, professional bodies, social media group administrators, Facebook pages, and LinkedIn to approach study participants. At the inception, through a myriad of sources, the researcher obtained the contact details of female digital entrepreneurs and the nature of their respective businesses. Then, a database of potential respondents was developed to ensure that these female digital business owners represented diverse businesses. The database comprised two lists: primary and backup, where the primary list includes the researcher's foremost choices of potential respondents representing heterogeneity among the population. However, given the possibility of respondents turning down the invitation, the backup list of potential respondents was maintained. For instance, out of the many social media-based

baking businesswomen contacts, only one was included in the primary list while keeping the remaining in the backup list.

Both the qualitative and quantitative samples were drawn from similar populations, ensuring consistency and comparability between the two phases of the study. The sampling bases for both the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews were aligned. To be included in the survey or interviews, participants had to meet three criteria: (1) be women who individually or jointly initiated and ran a business that relies partially or wholly on the Internet (e.g., selling products through social networking sites, online tutoring, app and software development, digital consultancy, or other online services); (2) be Sri Lankan citizens; and (3) operate a business that has been running for more than two years. In the survey, these three criteria were included as screening questions in the online questionnaire, which was accessible only to those who met all three. For the interviews, the researcher verified these criteria verbally during initial phone contact, and only those who qualified were added to the potential list of interviewees.

The survey included 161 female digital entrepreneurs, while 25 female digital entrepreneurs participated in the interviews. Convenience sampling was primarily used for both samples. For the interviews, convenience sampling was supplemented to some extent by purposive inclusion criteria to capture female digital entrepreneurs who rely on digital technology to varying degrees, in line with the definition by Hull et al. (2007). However, due to the limited number of female digital entrepreneurs and participants' reluctance to take part in interviews (as discussed in the preliminary informal interviews chapter), it was impractical to strictly adhere to all purposive criteria. Overall, the alignment between the two samples strengthens the mixed-methods design by allowing findings from one method to complement and validate another.

First, the researcher contacted the potential participants via phone to create trust and gain verbal consent. These calls enabled the researcher to develop a trusted relationship with respondents, which created a background for women to divulge their stories faithfully (Guckenbiehl and Zubielqui, 2022; Benali and Villesèche, 2024) and enabled her to attain rich insights into the specific ventures and industries. Responses to these initial phone calls were mixed; some respondents were genuinely enthusiastic about participating in the study, and others indicated that they would call back with feasible dates and times for interviews and subsequently failed to

fulfil their obligations. Those enthusiastic respondents were happy upon receiving an interview invitation from an academic affiliated with a Western University, as they regarded it as a measure of esteem. The previous literature has substantiated the constructive influence of the researcher's intellectual, economic and cultural privilege in fieldwork (Hewamanne, 2020; Benali and Villesèche, 2024). Another worthwhile finding unveiled during these introductory calls was interview fatigue experienced by these women as they were overrepresented in different interviews, talk shows, and other key events. As female digital entrepreneurs are few and far between, they were frequently invited to interviews by various government, corporate, and non-governmental organisations, resulting in a disproportionate burden on them. Consequently, they became exhausted and disengaged from further interviews as they perceived it as a non-value-adding, time and energy-consuming activity. Interview fatigue experienced by these women can be explained by considering the adverse effects of tokenism,[2] where the enhanced visibility given to minority women increases their pressures and stifles emotional expression (King *et al.*, 2010). To overcome the challenge of low response due to the overburden of interviews experienced by these women, the researcher worked on building up personal relationships with them and giving apparent and detailed explanations of the nature of the study. Sometimes, the researcher ordered goods from these businesses to build rapport and form initial encounters.

Upon receiving verbal consent from the potential respondents, interviews were scheduled. Potential respondents were sent a WhatsApp message asking for the feasible date, time, email ID, preferred mode, and preferred language to conduct interviews (Screenshot of a WhatsApp message given in Appendix K). Once participants responded to the message, the participant consent form (Refer Appendix L) and online interview protocol (Refer Appendix M) with clear instructions on the actions required were sent (A screenshot of an email was given in Appendix N). Out of all the respondents except one (01), everyone preferred online interviews (24), and language-wise, 09 preferred Sinhala medium interviews, and the remaining 16 opted for English medium interviews. While many of the Zoom meetings were conducted as planned, in certain instances, respondents turned up very late, rescheduled meetings for another time and did not even turn up without giving

[2] The pressure experienced by individuals belonging to minority women who first enter to a male-dominant industry as they comprise a small group.

any prior notice. These respondents who failed to meet the obligations acknowledged that despite prior agreement on a set time, unexpected domestic obligations arose, necessitating their prioritisation over attending the meeting.

The interviews lasted between 30 to 75 minutes and were conducted in a manner that aligned with the interview guide. All the others consented to audio recording the interviews except for two respondents. All the interviews, including Sinhala medium ones, were conducted by the researcher, a native Sri Lankan whose mother tongue is Sinhala. It was noted that even in English interviews, respondents used local jargon, expressions and idioms (*"ayyooo" to express disappointment, "*Like *exchanging* ginger *for* chilli" to express worsening circumstances) that reflect the pivotal role of one's mother tongue when narrating their real-life situations. Furthermore, the whole interview process reminded the researcher about the importance of paying attention to reflexivity, as Alvesson (2003) highlighted. Language usage in interviews affirmed the researcher's cultural privilege as an individual born and raised in the Sri Lankan context. Previous researchers emphasised that insider researchers' ability to conduct interviews more effectively by gaining the respondents' acceptance leads to the enhancement of trust and openness among them (Kerstetter, 2012; Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007, cited in Benali and Villesèche, 2024). While the researcher's proximity to the respondents was immensely helpful to get a more vivid picture and interpret subtle nuances, it brought up the risk of the researcher reflecting her views rather than the respondents'. While appreciating the importance of the researcher's active engagement and voice throughout the qualitative research process, previous literature emphasises that qualitative researchers should be cognisant of how the interpretations evolved and how the reflection of the researcher's thoughts has been controlled to minimise the subjectivity (Magnani and Gioia, 2023; Benali and Villesèche, 2024). To address the risk of overshadowing subjects' perspectives, the researcher maintained a constant dialogue with her supervisors on how she derived codes, and whenever possible, empirical evidence was given to elaborate on the development of concepts.

7.2.2 Pilot Interviews

Before starting the actual data collection, two pilot interviews were conducted. These pilot interviews enabled the refinement of the research instrument and highlighted any possible issues that may arise when conducting the interviews (Sampson, 2004).

Based on the outcomes of the pilot interviews, it became evident that even though the informant consenlt form and online interview protocol had been shared beforehand, most respondents came without signing the informant consent form. This may be due to the young individual's general reluctance to read detailed information (Baron and Mangen, 2021) and the collective culture in Sri Lanka, where people tend to rely more on trust-based relationships. Thus, when they get a request through a trusted party to join for an interview, they showcase little relevance on the legal or formal side of it. To overcome the problem of not attending to these documents, the researcher worked on sending a reminder email and a WhatsApp message about the informed consent form 24 hours prior to the meeting. Furthermore, it was noted that even the respondents who preferred the English medium for interviews used Sinhala jargon in between as they perceived it as essential to building an interesting conversation and due to the cultural proximity of the researcher to the respondents. Given the significance of the mother language when narrating a detailed story (Surangi, 2022), the researcher did not want to take any remedial actions; instead, the researcher was cautious when transcribing data.

Based on the responses to the pilot interviews, some refinements were required for the interview guide. First, it was recognised that responses given to *Q5 Tell me about your decision to transition into a career in digital entrepreneurship and Q6 What motivated you to start a digital business?* overlapped. To overcome this issue, Q5 was omitted while Q6 remained. Second, Q16 related to the role models was framed as *Could you explain your experience with a role model of a "female digital entrepreneur".* When answering this question, respondents were confined to talking about celebrities and well-accomplished individuals whom these respondents did not know personally. They did not talk about anyone from their field or in the arena of FDE who readily stepped in to guide them, counsel them and advise them on the way forward. Thus, an additional question, "*Have you had the opportunity to receive any sort of mentorship related to female digital*

entrepreneurship (Probe: did other women in digital entrepreneurship teach you/guide you on how to do things?)" was added to cover role models and mentorship to attain a more comprehensive understanding. In addition to these changes, another question related to future business plans was added. The interview guide, after the refinements, is given in the Appendix O.

7.3 Qualitative Data Analysis Procedure

All twenty-three audio-recorded interviews were verbatim transcribed (Creswell, 2003). During transcribing, pseudonyms were used to preserve the respondents' anonymity. Post-interview reflective notes were taken for all the interviews, which primarily reflected on what was said by the respondent, important incidents, and points that work as an adjunct to the interview data (Nayakaratne and Perera, 2024). Sample reflective notes were attached to the Appendix P. Detailed notes were taken during and after the two interviews that were not audio recorded to capture key points, quotes, and important information. Each interview tape was replayed to fix typographical errors and ensure the transcripts accurately reflected all spoken words, tones, and emphases.

The interviews were conducted using Sinhala medium and translated into English. As the researcher's mother tongue is Sinhala, she conducted the Sinhala medium interviews, and data gathering took place without eruption of language issues. The translation took place after the data collection, where the common practice of translating all transcriptions to English, known as forward translation, was used (McKenna, 2022), as it facilitates access to datasets by research supervisors if required. Based on Temple and Young (2004), if the researcher is proficient in the language of the respondents she is working with, she is a good candidate to be a translator. Therefore, the researcher initially translated this study. Then, the translation was validated by a professional translator to eradicate any loss of meaning and to ensure enhanced validity and trustworthiness of the research. A close rapport was maintained with the translator throughout the validation process, which helped to negotiate the expected meaning with the translator.

After the data recording process, data analysis was conducted in light of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006b). Following the six-step framework proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006a), thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo (R1 version) software. While thematic analysis calls for careful exploration and attaining patterns within the data, deriving the themes can be taken in two forms: inductive and deductive (Braun and Clarke, 2006b; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Deriving inductive themes is also called the bottom-up approach, which involves the identification of themes strongly associated with the data (Patton, 1990). Conversely, in the deductive themes, researchers' derivation of themes is bound by the underpinning theoretical framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006b). In this study, the researcher relied on a hybrid approach to thematic analysis, where inductive and deductive themes were derived (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) to understand the phenomenon comprehensively. Related to the research question, exploring the changing factors that drive FDE, themes have already been identified as priori codes based on the theoretical lens of IDTGIT. In addition to these themes identified based on the deductive approach to unearthing nuances about change factors, themes were derived based on an inductive approach. To address the research questions on how the intersectional identity of women influences women's participation in FDE and what social changes are activated through FDE, the researcher engaged mainly in deriving inductive themes.

The first step of the thematic analysis involved familiarising oneself with the data, which requires immersing in the data to familiarise oneself with the expanse and profundity of the content (Braun and Clarke, 2006b, 2006a). As the researcher was involved in the data collection process from its inception, she had a good prior knowledge of the data. The verbatim transcribing especially urged the researcher to go through the recordings multiple times, familiarising the researcher with the data. It was further improved by repetitively reading the transcripts, highlighting and making comments where appropriate.

The second step involved generating the initial codes, which are the most fundamental segments of the raw data, and giving meaning (Boyatzis, 1998). The entire data set was carefully reviewed at the initial coding, focusing on deriving interesting patterns that align with the constructs recognised through the theoretical framework and those emerging from the data. Efforts were made to identify as many as possible codes that can be refined, uncoded, or combined in later stages based on how the analysis is evolving (Braun and Clarke, 2006b). Through an iterative

process, 104 codes were derived at this stage. All data extracts that gave similar ideas were coded together, and the code names were given to reflect the concept. One of the biggest challenges when deriving codes was that the researcher ended up lost in data and deviated from the ultimate objectives of the research. To illustrate, as the discussions with women about their entrepreneurial journey cannot expunge their challenges, many women have shared their experiences about the barriers. Thus, at the initial coding, the researcher ended up emphasising these barriers rather than perceiving the strategies they use to navigate them. Therefore, as Coker (2022) emphasised, the researcher must immerse herself in the data and get lost while keeping her feet on the ground safely on the study's key research questions.

The third step involved sorting the codes into potential themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006a, 2006b). As the thematic analysis takes a hybrid approach, the researcher worked on inductive and deductive coding to attain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research objectives. For instance, following the deductive thematic analysis, “individual influences” was recognised as a theme based on the theoretical framework. As a sub-dimension of this theme, “familial male allies” emerged from the data related to the unique context (inductive). At this stage, some codes that did not belong to any themes were recognised under the miscellaneous theme. These miscellaneous codes cannot be undermined because they may lead to deriving stand-alone themes at later stages, or they can be removed after scrutinising (Byrne, 2022).

In the fourth step, previously derived initial themes were refined, and some initially identified themes were combined or classified at this stage to make those more sensible. The review used the dual criteria proposed by Patton (1990): *internal homogeneity,* which evaluates whether all the codes within the theme were coherent *and external heterogeneity,* which requires exploring whether there is a sufficient difference between themes. For instance, when deriving initial theme codes related to supporting the family well-being, providing employment and economic contributions were sorted under the second-order code “*elevation of recognition*”. However, deep diving into the quotes extracted indicates that these quotes directly reflect how female digital entrepreneurs contribute to family well-being and economic contribution. Thus, a new theme, namely “*Enhanced Family Wellbeing and Economic Contribution*” was developed.

Likewise, refining the initial themes was undertaken at this stage, which calls for combining, dividing, and removing certain candidate themes to give a more comprehensive understanding of the given phenomenon. While it does not precisely describe the criteria for completing Step 4, the review of themes, the moment it is realised that refinements are not adding any substantial nuances, it is advised to complete the review process (Braun and Clarke, 2006a). To ensure that the researcher did not stagnate at this stage, conscious efforts were made by the researcher, with the assistance of her supervisors, to move to the next stage, when she had a clear idea about the themes, their interrelations, and the overall story.

In the fifth step, defining and naming the themes were undertaken, which involves exploring the meaning of each theme to ensure they accurately reflect the data, are distinct from one another, and are clear on each theme's scope (Braun and Clarke, 2006a, 2006b). The researcher re-read the extracted data related to each code to ensure that extracts were aligned with the codes and that the codes segmented under themes were reviewed to ensure they were coherent and internally consistent. When it comes to the a priori themes, at this stage, the researcher focused on whether the identified codes best reflected the themes. Some initial themes derived from the inductive approach were renamed at this stage to make those more meaningful and precise. Marking the successful completion of the fifth step, the researcher clearly defined all the themes while emphasising delimitations. An example of the coding process from Step 2 to Step 5 is showcased in Table 7.1 below.

The final step involved writing up the report based on the finalised analysis. After immersing with the data for a considerable period and having deep discussions with her supervisors, the researcher was able to derive the final themes, interrelationships, and links between the themes written up in a manner that addressed the study's research questions. Concerning the presentation of qualitative findings, the researcher relied on Rockmann and Vough (2023), where efforts were taken to strike a balance between showing and telling. The researcher navigated the balance between using power quotes as evidence and providing interpretations, connecting the evidence with theories.

Table 7.1 Coding Example

<table>
<tr><td>Sample extracts from the transcripts</td><td colspan="2">Q 1 “…He (father) used to take me to buy materials, and I still can remember he was carrying fabric rolls under the crouching sun. -Dimali

Q 2 “…When I initially told him (husband) the idea, he was also as excited as I am. Even though I wanted to do it, I didn’t have the money to invest or know where to start. So, he was the one who invested in the business...”-Fathima

Q 3: “I knew he was different from our dating time. As you know, IT faculties are male-dominant, and most of my friends are also boys. He was never insecure about that. When I started the business, I had to team up with my boys and spend the whole night coding. He was very cool about that, and I am privileged in that way.”-Dulini

Q 4 “My father is a very open-minded person. I don’t think he ever had concerns about me being a girl.”-Jyothika</td></tr>
<tr><td>Generating the initial codes</td><td>Male family members supporting the business (Q1, Q2)</td><td>Fathers and husbands being open-minded (Q3, Q4)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Generating initial theme</td><td colspan="2">Familial male allies</td></tr>
<tr><td>Refining the initial themes</td><td colspan="2">Miscellaneous code “engaging in gender-egalitarian parenting,” which specifically covers data extracts on fathers treating equally their sons and daughters, was included in the “familial male allies”.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Defining and naming the themes</td><td colspan="2">Personal Influence- Familial male allies
Familial male allies are significant male family members who actively contribute to dismantling deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms and offer support for women in the family to attain better opportunities.</td></tr>
</table>

	Based on Trauth and Connolly (2021), personal influences cover significant individuals and life events of an individual that drive her towards engaging in FDE. Thus, integrating the emergent theme of familial male allies as a subconstruct of personal influences, the theme was named "personal influences-familial male allies".

7.3.1 Validity

Despite the immense role performed by validity and reliability as significant elements to showcase the quality of the research, there is no consensus about the determination of validity in qualitative research (Kirk and Miller, 1986; Venkatesh, Brown and Bala, 2013; Hayashi, Abib and Hoppen, 2019). Validity in qualitative research cannot be juxtaposed with the validity of quantitative research due to the ontological and epistemological differences between the two approaches (Leitch, Hill and Harrison, 2010; Venkatesh, Brown and Bala, 2013). Leitch, Hill and Harrison (2010) emphasise that validity in qualitative research covers many aspects, such as rigour, trustworthiness, appropriateness, and quality. It is expected that qualitative researchers should ensure that the research process is well-grounded, plausible, and reflective of the reality being studied without deviating from the subtle subjectivity that is inherent in qualitative research (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Hayashi, Abib and Hoppen, 2019). The inherent nature of qualitative research paves the way for human subjectivities; thus, qualitative research has been criticised for lacking academic rigour. While researchers' deep immersion in data cannot be eradicated entirely in qualitative research, it is imperative to ensure that research is undertaken rigorously while minimising the biases derived from subjectivity so that findings can be accepted. Despite the consensual agreement over specific validity measures in qualitative research, many are of the view that a processual approach should be used when determining the validity of qualitative research, rather than binding it to an outcome stage (Leitch, Hill and Harrison, 2010; Venkatesh, Brown and Bala, 2013; Hayashi, Abib and Hoppen, 2019). Many previous researchers have substantiated the effectiveness of the processual approach. The researcher relied on the recommendations provided by Venkatesh, Brown, and Bala (2013) to determine the validity of

this study, where design validity, analytical validity, and inferential validity were determined at different stages of the research process.

Design validity emphasises the extent to which the qualitative study was designed and executed to ensure the attainment of credible and transferable findings (Venkatesh, Brown, and Bala, 2013). One aspect of design validity is descriptive validity, which emphasises the need to substantiate factual accuracy without deviating from what the researcher heard or experienced (Maxwell, 1992; Coleman, 2021). Several measures were taken throughout the research process to ensure the descriptive validity. Before the data collection, potential respondents were well informed about the importance of picking a location with minimal distractions and good-quality internet access, which are pivotal for generating high-quality recordings. During the data collection, the researcher asked probing and follow-up questions to ensure a holistic viewpoint of the respondent was attained. When the English medium respondents used their mother tongue (Sinhala) in between as a mode of cultural resonance or emotional expression, the researcher facilitated and encouraged such communication without distraction to ensure a more nuanced communication that aligns with the interviewee's cultural and personal identity. Furthermore, reflective notes were taken after each interview, emphasising the respondents' emotions, feelings, and situations that prevailed at that point. Regarding data analysis, the researcher read and re-read the transcripts and replayed the recordings to ensure that the respondents' ideas were well captured without significant deviations. Another aspect of design validity is credibility, which emphasises whether the findings are believable from the respondents' perspective (Venkatesh, Brown and Bala, 2013). The researcher relied on triangulation to accomplish credibility, where different methods and analysis techniques were used to get various aspects of reality rather than believing in a single aspect (Patton, 1999). Member checking was also verified to ensure that the researcher captured what the interviewee wanted to express (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009; Fox and Connolly, 2018). Throughout the interview, whenever the researcher found some blurred areas or ambiguous statements, the researcher presented her interpretation and got it verified by the interviewee. When familiarising with the data, the researcher found two instances where she wanted more clarity on what the interviewee wanted to express. In those instances, the researcher made phone calls to respondents and cleared up any doubts. Another strategy to enhance credibility is to give negative cases extra attention (Patton, 1999). For instance, contrary to the largely

accepted notion of a lack of support from the government, a handful of respondents praised the support they have received from the state sector. The researcher deep dived into this area by asking probing questions and explaining, which unearthed an interesting finding about the role played by familial connections in attaining government assistance. Even though generalisation is not expected from qualitative research, transferability, to some extent, has been considered another criterion for establishing validity in qualitative research (Venkatesh, Brown, and Bala, 2013). Aligning with Hull *et al.'s* (2007) definition of digital entrepreneurship, the researcher made conscious efforts to ensure that a broader range of digital entrepreneurs was taken into account as respondents which paved the way to transfer the findings of the study to a broader audience. Likewise, throughout the process, the researcher took active initiatives to ensure that design validity was attained.

Analytical validity manifests the effectiveness of qualitative data gathering and analysis, which determines the validity from theoretical validity, dependability, plausibility, and consistency (Venkatesh, Brown, and Bala, 2013). Theoretical validity requires determining the validity of the concepts and the postulated linkages among the concepts (Maxwell, 1992). To prove the theoretical validity, the study was guided by the underlying theories of IDTGIT, digital affordances, and intersectionality, and concepts were derived based on the literature review. The process of determining the relationships among the concepts by integrating literature and empirical evidence was sufficiently explained, proving that the study was theoretically grounded. The dependability and consistency aspects manifest the study's ability to generate the same results if repeated under the same conditions (Enworo, 2023; Ahmed, 2024). As a key strategy to substantiate the study's dependability, the researcher made efforts to ensure that the research objectives, data, and analysis were well aligned with the research problem. Continuous guidance from her supervisors, feedback from the independent panel member appointed by Dublin City University and comments from the academic conferences were instrumental in ensuring dependability. Careful designing of the research instruments that reflect the questions that serve the purpose is vital in substantiating the dependability (Enworo, 2023). Informal interviews with key stakeholders in the field of FDE were undertaken before developing the interview guide. A careful review of the interview guide by supervisors and pilot testing of the interview guide was conducted to ensure the effective development of the research instruments. At the data analysis

stage, the researcher showcased power quotes and interpretations to prove that claims were rooted in the data (Pratt, 2008; Rockmann and Vough, 2023). This initiative helped demonstrate the study's trustworthiness. Research supervisors also scrutinised the researcher's interpretation by comparing it with power quotes to ensure that the researcher derived interpretations based on data rather than reflecting the researcher's thoughts. Plausibility refers to whether the explanations, interpretations, and theories developed based on the study are derived from the data (Venkatesh, Brown and Bala, 2013) and the initiatives discussed by the researcher to verify the different aspects of analytical validity, resulting in verifying plausibility.

Inferential validity reflects how well others can verify or corroborate the findings derived from the study. It was highlighted that inferences derived from a study are as good as the process that was followed by the researcher when reaching those inferences (Leitch, Hill and Harrison, 2010). In the given study, the researcher used various strategies to ensure integrity and rigour (as discussed above). Thus, using a processual approach, the researcher ensured the academic rigour of the inferences derived from the qualitative study.

7.4 Overview of the Themes

As emancipation manifests as an entity's liberation from the constraints they experience and freeing from the dependencies they have, which enables them to uplift their state (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009; Benali and Villesèche, 2024), the researcher focused on exploring emancipation as a process. In the given study, perceiving emancipation as a holistic process, research questions were developed to attain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon, and through the interviews, it is anticipated that all three research questions will be addressed.

RQ 1 What are the **change factors** that drive Sri Lankan women to engage in female digital entrepreneurship?

RQ 2 How does the digital entrepreneurial journey vary among the women in Sri Lanka as their **gender intersects with other social ascriptions?**

RQ 3 What are the **transformative changes activated** through women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship?

The derived themes were ordered under three main sections, aligning with the research questions. The first section addresses the factors influencing women's participation in FDE using the theoretical lens of IDTGIT. The second section is related to the impact of intragroup differences among women towards the transformative potential offered by digital entrepreneurship, where the researcher used intersectionality theory and IDTGIT as the theoretical lens to draw inferences. As the last aspect, social changes activated through women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship were explained. A table outlining the specific characteristics of respondents is given below in Table 7.2. Tables 7.3, Table 7.4, and Table 7.5 below showcase the data structures related to the three main sections discussed above.

Table 7.2 Factors Shaping Women's Participation in Female Digital Entrepreneurship

First order codes	**Second order codes**	**Aggregate Theoretical Dimensions**
Statements about open-minded men in the families; fathers engaging in gender egalitarian parenting; fathers, husbands, and partners supporting business and home front.	Personal influences- Familial male allies	Individual influences
Statements about the lack of role models and mentors in the local context, women's reluctance to act as role models, and exposure to role models and mentors mainly through social networking sites.	Personal influences- Role models and mentors	
Statements about dissatisfaction with previous employment, gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment at the workplace, loss of jobs due to the pandemic, and development of	Significant life experiences: Previous work experience	

skills and competencies through work experience.		
Statements about women's desire to capitalise on a hobby, serve society, work-life balance, innovation, desire for financial gains, and realise a dream.	Personal characteristics - Internal motives	
Statements about confidence in using digital technology, technological eagerness, and social media proficiency with limited digital literacy.	Personal characteristics- Digital self-efficacy	
Statements about making bold decisions, being aware of the possible risks, and analyzing costs and benefits before deciding.	Personal characteristics- Increased risk-taking propensity among women	
Statements about the proliferation of female digital businesses during the pandemic and economic crisis; female digital businesses remain stable or marked growth in the face of economic crisis; negative consequences such as increasing price of technology and raw materials, the low buying power of customers, and reduction in profit margins.	Economic Instability	

Statements about women idealising digital entrepreneurship as a viable career option; women's ability to easily switch careers due to lower economic expectations; evolving women's risk-taking attitudes; gender stereotypes and male dominance; women as a misfit in digital entrepreneurship.	Cultural Influences- uneven change in attitudes about female digital entrepreneurship	Environmental Influences
Statements about entrepreneurship are seen as a low-status career, parental influence on career choices, and a lack of understanding about digital entrepreneurship in society.	Cultural Influences - perceived occupational prestige disparity	
Statements about state sector inefficiencies, incompetent government officials, and prejudicial policies and practices of the government.	Policy influences: State sector inadequacy towards digital entrepreneurship	
Statements about IT education lagging, lack of education and training on entrepreneurship, lack of emphasis on career guidance and professional development, rote memorisation and emphasis on exams and grades, and need to update the education system.	Policy influences: Suboptimal educational policies	
Statements about the impact of social class, marital status, geographic location, and educational attainments.	Personal demographics	Individual Identity

Table 7.3 Intersectionality and Female Digital Entrepreneurship

First order codes	Second order codes	Aggregate Theoretical Dimensions
Statements about digital businesses as an alternative to the lack of career opportunities among women living in remote areas, to overcome the exacerbated challenges faced by married women, to overcome the deprived states due to ethnicity, as a pathway for women with high social status pressured to stay back at home.	Digital entrepreneurship to overcome augmented barriers resulting from women's intersectional identities.	FDE is a great leveller for intersectional marginalisation.
Statements about language divide, digital access challenges, and digital literacy challenges in rural areas.	Hindrance of digital entrepreneurial activities due to intersectional identities	Digital spaces uphold or exacerbate intersectional marginalisation.

Table 7.4 Social Changes Activated Through Women's Engagement in FDE

First order codes	Second order codes	Aggregate Theoretical Dimensions
Statements about attaining financial gains, more social exposure, work-life harmony, and sharpening skills through digital entrepreneurship.	Marking growth as a person.	Female digital entrepreneurs as active change agents.
Statements about the sense of pride in being a digital entrepreneur, transforming family relationships, and enhancing social recognition.	Elevating recognition of women.	
Statements about being growth-oriented and leading the way as responsible female digital entrepreneurs.	Becoming digital entrepreneurs driven by growth objectives.	
Statements about women being able to contribute to family well-being, economic development, and providing employment.	Enhanced Family Wellbeing and Economic Contribution.	
Statements about inspiring daughters, educating, uplifting, and empowering other women.	Female digital entrepreneurs are evolving as role models.	

Statements about digital entrepreneurship call for tiresome multitasking for women; cyberstalking; mainly catering to female customers; and male family members performing traditionally male-dominated functions of the business.	Gendered challenges for women in digital entrepreneurship.	Reinforcement of patriarchy in the digital context.

Table 7.5 Overview of Respondents

	Name	Age	Marital Status	Dependent Children	Geographic Location	Highest Educational Attainment	Funding Source of the Business	Nature of the Digital Business	Years in Digital Business	Future business plans
1	Priyanka	35	Married	2 Kids	Colombo District	MBA	Self-funded	Play area and parenting education	3 yrs	Business growth and attaining more academic qualifications in the fields of digital business, and psychology
2	Dimali	35	Married	No Kids	Galle District	Bachelor's degree in marketing	Self-funded	Online clothing store specialise in bridal and party wear	9 yrs	Business growth and expansion to other countries
3	Kenu	34	Married	2 Kids	Colombo District	PhD	Self-funded	Manufacture skincare products for children and selling online	1.5 yrs	Business growth through expanding product portfolio and setting up a website
4	Shalika	33	Single	No Kids	Colombo District	Bachelor's degree in	Self-funded	Digital app development	5 yrs	Business growth

						chemical engineering				
5	Bhagya	38	Married	1 Kid	Kandy District	Bachelors' degree specialising in Chemistry	Self-funded	Selling cakes online	7 yrs	Expansion of the business by partnering with UberEATS and opening a physical boutique
6	Anoma	55	Married	Children are above 18	Welimada District	GCE A/L	Self-funded	Online selling of plants	5 yrs	Business growth by adopting new technology and sharing knowledge with other women
7	Nimali	34	Married	1 Kid	Kandy Distric	Professional qualification in HRM	Self-funded	Online clothing store	6 yrs	Continuing the business without any major expansions.
8	Kalani	41	Single	No Kids	Colombo District	Bachelor's degree in economics and English.	Self-funded	Online inbound travel agency	7 yrs	Business growth. Partnering up with other providers in the tourism business and attracting affluent travelers.

9	Dulini	34	Married	1 Kid	Gampaha District	MBA	Self-funded	Software development	7 yrs	Expand the business and register the business in other countries.
10	Imesha	28	Married	No Kids	Rathnapura District	GCE A/L	Self-funded	Digital Publication Agency	4 yrs	Attain higher education in digital businesses.
11	Ranuki	33	Married	No Kids	Anuradhapura District	GCE A/L	Self-funded	Online store of wooden kitchen appliances	2.5 yrs	Expand the business via a broader social media presence and target corporate customers
12	Devashree	30	Single	No Kids	Vavuniya District	Bachelor's degree in software engineering.	Self-funded	IT Solutions	6 yrs	Business growth and expansion to other countries
13	Chamila	33	Married	3 Kids	Kurenegala District	GCE O/L	Self-funded	Online stationery shop	1 yr	Streamline the business and work on growth
14	Sithmi	27	Single	No Kids	Kegalle District	GCE A/L	Self-funded	Online store of macramé designs	2 yrs	Marking the business growth by expanding to the production of finished garments.

15	Kajol	26	Single	No Kids	Mullaitivu District	Bachelor's degree in software engineering.	Self-funded	Online professional development educational institute	5 yrs	Develop an app on career guidance and professional development
16	Gayani	30	Married	1 Kid	Anuradhapura District	GCE A/L	Self-funded	Online store of curated gift boxes	3 yrs	Business growth by marking a shift beyond Facebook to other platforms
17	Sachini	28	Single	No Kids	Colombo District	Bachelor's degree in designing	Self-funded	Online store of wooden peg dolls	6 yrs	Market expansion through setting up a website
18	Asangi	30	Married	2 Kids	Colombo District	Bachelor's degree in fashion designing	Self-funded	Online saree shop	4 yrs	Expand the product portfolio
19	Sajeewani	31	Married	No Kids	Colombo District	MBA	Self-funded	Public relations and event management businesses	4.5 yrs	Business growth and mentoring other women on digital entrepreneurship

20	Lakmali	40	Single	No Kids	Colombo District	MSc	Self-funded	IT solutions	7 yrs	Business expansion to other countries
21	Jenifer	36	Single	No Kids	Colombo District	Bachelor's degree in management	Self-funded	Digital media broadcast network	3 yrs	Business growth by creating more awareness about digital media among the SL community
22	Malmi	31	Married	No Kids	Galle District	GCE A/L	Self-funded	Online store of iron-made home decor	4 yrs	Market expansion by broader social media presence and attain educational qualifications on digital technologies and English
23	Fathima	43	Married	6 Children out of which 3 dependents	Puttalam District	GCE O/L	Self-funded	Online cake and finger food store	4 yrs	Market growth and grooming daughters to take up the business in future
24	Jyothika	25	Single	No Kids	Trincomalee District	Bachelor's degree in management	Funding provided by an	Mobile and web applications	2 yrs	Market expansion, developing digital platform targeting

						and information technology	intergovernmental organisation			towards helping women's entrepreneurship
25	Kumari	38	Married	3 Kids	Rathnapura District	Bachelor's degree in arts	Self-Funded	Caricature drawing business done through Instagram page	3 yrs	Focusing more on catering to foreign customers.

7.5 Factors Affecting Female Participation in Digital Entrepreneurship

Key findings derived from the thematic analysis enabled the researcher to address the three research questions of the study. When reporting the findings, the researcher relied on the guidelines that Rockmann and Vough (2023) gave to ensure that persuasive claims well-grounded in data were made. Findings that were most aligned with the three research questions and that had nuances are reported first (Leitch, Hill and Harrison, 2010; Rockmann and Vough, 2023), and to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, claims are backed by power quotes. Through the lens of IDTGIT, the researcher analysed the empirical evidence to unearth the key change factors that drive Sri Lankan women to navigate the pathway of digital entrepreneurship. A myriad of changes that occurred at the personal, organisational, family, and macro levels were unearthed through the data analysis, which enabled the researcher to attain a more comprehensive understanding of the change factors that drive FDE. Aligning with the IDTGIT, these change factors were divided into three main divisions: individual influences, individual identity, and environmental influences.

7.5.1 Individual Influences

Individual influences cover the role of significant people, notable life experiences, and personal characteristics as change factors that drive women to pursue their digital entrepreneurial businesses (Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Related to significant people, the findings unearthed the substantial role played by the familial male allies, role models, and mentors towards women embracing digital entrepreneurial roles, albeit with constraints. One of the significant breakthroughs was the change in the typical mindset and role held by male family members, where most of these fathers, husbands, and brothers started encouraging and supporting these women to challenge the stereotypical gender norms. Regarding role models and mentors, responses illuminated the positive influence generated by social networking groups in navigating the issue of the lack of female role models and mentors as a key change factor that leverages women's engagement in FDE. Another study finding is that one major reason for women's reluctance to act as role models for other women is the presence of "Queen Bees" in the field of FDE. Furthermore,

the influence of the respondents' previous work experiences was explored, and responses showcased that the impact of previous work experiences on FDE is diverse. It is noteworthy that both positive and negative work experiences boosted their desire and drove respondents to pursue digital entrepreneurship. Based on the data analysis, personal characteristics, namely internal motives, digital self-efficacy, and increased risk-taking propensity among women, were recognised to impact FDE positively. An in-depth evaluation of respondents' views substantiates that recognised sub-constructs of individual influences predominantly encourage women to pursue digital entrepreneurial ventures.

7.7.1.3 Personal influences-Familial male allies

Most of the respondents have unanimously acknowledged that the support they get from their families is the biggest strength that enables them to maneuver digital entrepreneurial pathways despite many barriers. Respondents particularly highlighted their fathers and husbands' roles in encouraging them to take up a traditionally male-dominant career. Some respondents specifically mentioned that if it was not for those empowering men in the family, they could have never been able to navigate unsupportive cultural conditions and other barriers and gain social legitimisation as digital entrepreneurs. These men engaged in assisting women with business operations, and they provided the necessary emotional support for these women. Specifically, the fathers involved in a gender-egalitarian parenting style that provided normative sanctioning for their daughters to unleash their dreams without being constrained by social norms and expectations. The quote below by Kajol, a young unmarried digital entrepreneur, reflects her father's immense role in her decision to start an online education institute.

...my father was a little different... He started supporting me in every possible way. He realised the importance of having a good quality internet connection, so even without telling me, he upgraded the internet connection we were using…Having been in the educational sector for more than 4 decades, he shared many contacts with me without which the academy could have been an utter failure.

When it comes to the support from the male family members, an interesting finding was unearthed: three women highlighted that they waited until they got married to start their digital businesses. These girls from conventional family backgrounds were constrained by their families due to the pressure from society to conform to gendered socio-cultural norms. When it comes to their daughters' careers, these parents particularly encouraged them to pursue careers with more social recognition because a woman's profession significantly influences her marriage prospects in Sri Lanka. Thus, some women waited till marriage before taking up digital entrepreneurship with the support of their gender-egalitarian partners. For instance, Dimali, a management graduate, emphasised how she realised her dream of opening an online clothing store with her husband's immense support despite her parents' disapproval.

...he is very helpful. You know, when you have attained good educational qualifications in Sri Lanka, they expect you to work for a big company. So, for an educated girl, transitioning from a corporate job to a digital entrepreneurial venture is more challenging. Cause the others think you are a lunatic to move away from a big corporate job... So, my parents also never approved of it. Therefore, I also had my own share of doubts about whether I was doing the right thing. If it was not for my husband, I wouldn't be able to give birth to my brainchild business. He's the one who always motivated me. He's the one who actually asked me to follow my passion.

Based on the data analysis, it becomes evident that familial male allies play a crucial role in women pushing gendered boundaries and navigating digital entrepreneurship. As men play the role of head of household, the support and encouragement they give provide major backing for the legitimisation of female digital entrepreneurship.

7.7.1.3 Personal influences - Role models and mentors

Most respondents echoed the lack of role models and mentors whom they can look up to and ask for guidance in the local context. Interestingly, some of the responses embodied the idea that respondents were never concerned about the existence of role models. The response from the

Jyothika related to role models is given below, and it echoes the responses of many of the participants.

...sorry, nobody comes to my mind as a role model. Honestly, I can't think of any such person whom I could look up to and learn from.

As informal preliminary interviews shed light on the surprising aspect of women's reluctance to act as role models and mentors as they perceive intra-group competition, the discussion was prompted towards why women are reluctant to become role models and mentors. Respondents of the qualitative study share similar sentiments, highlighting that successful female digital entrepreneurs are reluctant to act as role models for other women, as they are jealous and perceive the threat of new entrants. Other than this nuanced finding of perceived jealousy, empirical evidence unveiled that a lack of confidence and difficulties in committing time are reasons women are reluctant to act as role models. One respondent drew attention to problems associated with potential mentees. She emphasised that in certain instances, these novice digital entrepreneurs expect excessive guidance with minimal effort. The quote below illustrates how Anoma shared her negative experiences of reluctant role modelling due to perceived competition. *It is unfortunate that women are not much into sharing what they know. Jealousy among us is pretty high, I guess. When I started this Facebook page, I asked another girl doing an online cake shop about how to run a Facebook ad campaign. She is in a different field and is young so I thought she would definitely help me. But she never stepped up to help me. Did not even return my phone call.*

While the persistent problem of insufficient role models and mentors arose as a key theme, it is noteworthy that several respondents stressed how they got exposure to role models globally and how they received mentorship from women worldwide through digital platforms. Specifically, they talked about the immense role played by the social networking groups specifically dedicated to women's empowerment, through which they got access to role models, mentors, and great friends who provided them with emotional and social support. Many respondents appreciated the tremendous emotional support they received from the Facebook support groups. They identified these groups as their "go-to place" when they needed someone to talk to, share their fears, or when they needed someone to listen to them. The below quote from Sithmi captures her experience of

receiving guidance and mentorship from female digital entrepreneurs through social networking groups.

...I got to know her through Facebook groups that both of us are actively engaging in... Despite her young age, she manages her business exceptionally well. Since starting my venture, she has provided support. She remains a constant source of inspiration for me, particularly due to her remarkable ability to handle negative comments with grace and resilience. Witnessing her response to adversity has made me realise the importance of starting my business earlier.

Overall, empirical evidence suggests that the long-standing issue of insufficient role models and mentors hindering women's workforce participation persists in the given context. However, a noteworthy change in factors is the increase in role models and mentors due to the proliferation of digital platforms.

7.7.1.3 Significant Life Experiences- Prior Work Experience

Many respondents emphasised that prior work experience significantly reinforced their participation in FDE. All the respondents with prior work experience appreciated what they had learned, which helped to mould them into female digital entrepreneurs. The positive work experiences as well as the susceptible conditions and weaknesses in the workplace, have also resulted in women marking a significant milestone in their lives that encouraged them to shift from employment to FDE.

Almost all of the respondents who worked before consensually believed that their work experience was instrumental in them starting and running their entrepreneurial businesses. Some respondents strongly advocated that girls should never step into digital businesses without having prior experience. They emphasised the learning and skills development opportunities they attained through employment and explicitly mentioned how useful such opportunities were, irrespective of the field of business they started. Priyanka, an ex-banker, emphasised how her banking experience became instrumental when she started off her business of play area and web-based parenting education.

I will not recommend any girl to start a business without corporate experience because of that professionalism, that way of dealing with people, and the valuable lessons you learn are worth

very much…. I will definitely tell them to start working first. Understand how the corporate world works, understand the processes, get the training from them, and then slowly pursue your dream business...

Not only positive work experiences, but the respondents also emphasised that the workplace vulnerabilities they experienced encouraged them to become digital entrepreneurs. These workplace vulnerabilities encapsulate the bitter experiences of gender-based discrimination, harassment they went through, the lack of opportunities meant that they had to try out new things, and dissatisfactions that revolved around the lack of work-life balance, low pay, and unethical work practices. Kalani, who operates an online inbound travel agency, shared her disheartening experiences about the gender-based harassment she experienced at her previous job.

My boss was a womaniser... As I expressed my disapproval, he tried to take revenge on me. Work pressure was crazy because for no reason he was pressurising me and making me feel like, I was not productive and not doing my job properly.

Furthermore, three respondents emphasised how sudden job losses due to the pandemic and economic crises were a significant milestone for them to consider a career transition. Based on the findings, job losses resulted in women considering alternative income-generation sources to compensate for their lost revenues. It gave them quality time to explore new possibilities and business opportunities, creating a desire within women to start their own business. Holistically, most female digital entrepreneurs who participated in the interviews consensually agreed that their work experience positively impacted their entrepreneurial journey. Furthermore, some respondents particularly emphasised the susceptibilities they experienced related to their previous jobs, which drove them to think about digital entrepreneurship, which they perceived as a viable pathway.

7.7.1.3 Personal Characteristics-Internal Motives

Internal motives are predominant in reinforcing women to start and run digital businesses despite the male-gendered connotation given to those digital businesses. While an array of external factors influences one's intention to engage in certain behaviours, the liberation potential offered

by these external forces is heavily influenced by the inner motives of an individual. Women's desire for innovation was fueled by the development of digital technologies, which enhanced their knowledge and capacity to innovate and come up with novel business ideas to introduce new solutions for customers. Shalika, a founder of a tech company that engages in developing apps, emphasised that her ultimate desire is to give customers novel experiences they have never experienced before. Shalika's desire to provide innovative customer experience is reflected in the quote from her interview below.

Even if you go to like a proper play in Sri Lanka, everything's done manually through bank transfers and WhatsApp messages. So, I kind of wanted to change this and give a new solution for the clients. So, I worked on building a system. One stop solution…and it is going to be a whole new experience for everyone.

Other than the desire for innovation, several respondents mentioned other motives such as the desire to realise a dream, a desire for work-life balance, capitalising on a hobby, and a desire to serve society as key drivers that motivated them to pursue digital entrepreneurship in the face of discouraging socio-cultural messages and other constraints. Below is a quote from Gayani showcasing her strong desire for work-life balance, which drove her to engage in FDE.

The only reason I thought of starting this business is so that I can attend it while I am staying with my baby. That flexibility is the biggest drive for me to start off this business.

These findings reflect women's perception of digital entrepreneurship as a means of fulfilment rather than a mere income-generation activity. Even though economic gains play a role in women's participation in FDE, they were mainly driven by their interests and desires instead of financial pressures, which can be viewed as a progressive transformation in the broader society. Overall, findings showcase that multifaceted motives drive women's engagement in FDE.

7.7.1.3 Personal Characteristics-Digital Efficacy

While Digital Self Efficacy (DSE) reflects one's perception of her own digital technology capabilities, the DSE of an individual significantly impacts women's engagement in FDE more than the objective capabilities of the individual. Proving that "faith in oneself turns dreams into reality", women's perception of their technology capabilities and high level of confidence that they can work with digital platforms effectively resulted in them starting ventures on digital platforms. As Bandura (2006) emphasised, efficacy beliefs influence an individual's commitment to a particular goal and their resilience in the face of obstacles and adversity. Thus, women's enhanced DSE beliefs can be recognised as a key change factor that drives women to pursue digital entrepreneurial roles despite the gendered barriers they experience. Notably, despite the degree of digitalisation, most respondents acknowledged the immense role of DSE. Anoma (age 55), who is engaged in an online business selling plants fervently believes that she is technically competent enough to run a digital business, albeit she does not belong to the digital natives[3] category. Anoma's DSE is reflected in her own words, which are below.

I am really really good at using Facebook. I can upload videos and create small movie clips, and even if I get stuck at some point, I can go through YouTube tutorials and learn things. If you go to my Facebook page all the posts in it were created by me.

Even though most respondents were of the view that they are capable in terms of digital technologies, it was evident that their technology capabilities are mainly confined to the use of social networking sites. Even though they seamlessly work with social networking features related to communication and content sharing, they showcased a lack of competencies related to more advanced and diverse promotional strategies available on social networking sites that can be tailored to the particular business. Furthermore, these individuals lack competencies and interests in using different software, developing applications, and integrating online payment gateways and intricate databases for their businesses, which can be detrimental when it is required to level up their presence in digital spaces. The quote extracted from Kenu's interview encapsulates the voices of many respondents.

[3] Digital natives are individuals who grew up in the era of digital technology

I am thinking of setting up a website and expanding my product portfolio. Will see how it goes. Cause I am not comfortable with this whole website part yet.

In a context where the career pathways for women are challenged as they must carry their gender as a liability (Ely, 1994), embracing the new identity as a digital entrepreneur has much to do in terms of DSE. The personal agency of a woman who steps into FDE will predominantly stem from how confident she is about her own abilities related to digital technologies.

Personal Characteristics- Increased risk-taking propensity among women

Contrary to the widely accepted notion that women are risk-averse and perceive a high fear of failure (Fossen, 2009; Bardasi, Sabarwal and Terrell, 2011), in the given context, the evolution of women's risk-taking attitudes emerged as a reinforcing factor that drives women's participation in FDE. Respondents' increased risk-taking propensity was reflected through their views, where they emphasised the importance of risk-taking, not only related to entrepreneurial risk, which particularly focuses on the success or failure of the business due to uncertainties, but also that they should be adept at carefully navigating and managing the risks associated with societal backlash. As engaging in FDE requires women to embrace digital technologies and entrepreneurship, which are commonly recognised as male domains, they anticipate that they will have to deal with the risks associated with negative societal responses. The quote below by the respondent Sithmi emphasises how important it is to go beyond your boundaries accepting uncertainties.

Don't be afraid to step outside your comfort zone, dare to do things differently, and trust in your abilities to overcome obstacles along the way. Remember, great accomplishments often require taking bold risks and staying committed to your passion.

Dimali, who started her online clothing brand after giving up her stable career, emphasised how she has taken bold steps to take risks even though many people did not support her decision.

I am a graduate of one of the best local universities, and I had a stable job. So many people around me were telling me it was not worth the risk that I was taking. If we think about all the challenges we will face, we will not be able to do what we're capable of.

Women's viewpoints about risk-taking propensity encapsulate that many women have made much more conscious and aware decisions to engage in digital entrepreneurship than just merely jumping into it as a mode to earn some quick money. In a country like Sri Lanka, where economic uncertainties and strong patriarchal gender norms are inevitable, women who started off and continued digital businesses truly reflect their exceptional skills in risk-taking.

7.5.2 Environmental influences

Based on the findings, environmental factors, namely cultural Influences, uneven change in attitudes about FDE, perceived occupational prestige disparity, economic instability, state sector inadequacy towards digital entrepreneurship and suboptimal educational policies were identified as the vital change in factors that evoke heightened enthusiasm among women for participation in FDE. When it comes to attitudes about women, it is evident that progressive changes related to societal attitudes about women are taking place, even though there is still room for improvement. On the verge of exploring the sociocultural factors that reinforce women to engage in digital entrepreneurial ventures, it was found that digital entrepreneurship is still lagging in terms of institutional validation and social recognition. These noteworthy constraints prevent women from engaging in digital entrepreneurship as a career. As Sri Lanka was at a unique juncture in terms of economic state stemming from consecutive crises, including the Covid pandemic and severe economic contraction (World Bank, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022), most respondents pointed out how the economic instability impacted their digital entrepreneurial ambitions. When exploring the policy-level changes, there was no evidence of policy initiatives that offered positive reinforcement for FDE. Respondents highlighted that poor support from the state sector serves as a significant deterrent for Sri Lankan entrepreneurs in general, and challenges are more detrimental for women who are already in a disadvantaged state.

7.7.1.3 Cultural Influences- Uneven Change in Attitudes about Women and Women in FDE

Based on the empirical evidence, changes in societal attitudes about women and their engagement in digital entrepreneurship emerged as key factors affecting FDE. It became evident how the societal attitudes about women and their digital entrepreneurial endeavours have evolved amidst the persistence of deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms and the conventional perception that digital entrepreneurship is a male domain. One of the striking findings is that in certain instances, women find it easier to switch from a stable career to digital entrepreneurship, which involves significant risk due to the gendered ideologies prevailing in the Sri Lankan context, which place less economic pressure on women.

Proving that deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms still dominate in South Asian countries, respondents verbalised about the challenges they have to face when meeting the societal expectation of a 'good woman'. The role of a good woman primarily involves living with the family under the care of a male guardian and assuming primary caretaker responsibility in the family, even if she is employed or holds a higher position in society (Kodagoda, 2010). Therefore, these women are expected to prioritise their homefront over their career commitments to safeguard their "good women" identity in society. Furthermore, respondents shared their experiences of receiving unsolicited advice from the businessmen; getting verbally abused at aggressive male-dominant marketplaces when they go to buy raw materials and receiving limited higher education opportunities as they had to marry early. These views reflect that patriarchal gender norms still govern societal attitudes about being a woman. When women deviate from meeting these expectations and start receiving more public visibility, they tend to experience resistance from the broader society. As the digital technology sector and entrepreneurship have both been dominated by masculine norms, digital entrepreneurship is recognised as a male-dominant field, making it difficult for women to attain legitimacy as digital entrepreneurs. Devashree, owner of a software development business, echoes the societal attitudes toward women and their engagement in FDE.

…Cause everywhere you go bank, Pradesheeya Sabha, it's mostly men, and they thought I am immature. Everyone got some advice for me as if all the men know what I want to do with my life and business except me.
I remember when I went to get this BR (business registration) work, one of the male officials gave me a big lecture on why I should concentrate more on my academic career than running with this crazy business idea.

Whilst respondents underscored the prevalence of conventional gender norms that place women in a disadvantaged position, they acknowledged the gradual change in societal attitudes about women's engagement in economic activities, which tend to have incremental effects on FDE in Sri Lanka. With the prevailing economic conditions in the country, families have come to terms with the importance of dual-income earnings. While conventional gender roles of women in domestic spheres are still valued, there is a growing appreciation for women contributing to the family's financial well-being. With such a gradual transformation of attitudes about women shouldering dual responsibilities, individuals started idealising digital entrepreneurship as a viable career option due to the flexibility that does not require them to deviate from socially expected gendered behaviours completely. Asangi expressed her thoughts that societal attitudes are increasingly becoming more optimistic about FDE as a viable career, which echoes the voices of many others who participated in the study.

My husband is okay with me doing this business as long as I am not too busy. They know that as I am doing this online because I will be mostly at home for kids and family. I'm able to manage time with the kids and family and all that…I would say there's no interference from them. It's my own thing, and it's my hobby. As long as my schedules do not interfere with our lifestyle, they all support me.

One of the nuanced findings is that women started perceiving the indirect positive influence of conventional gender norms on their intention to engage in FDE. Several respondents commented that their career shift from a full-time job to FDE was less stressful than men's, as families expect less from women regarding employment and earnings. As a result of strong

patriarchal gender norms, the families of these respondents do not expect their daughters or wives to take financial responsibility towards their families. They do not pressure women to engage in stable careers, which is not the same for men, whose success will be determined by their accomplishments in stable careers, good income, and social recognition. Thus, respondents who gave up their corporate jobs to become female digital entrepreneurs, which has low recognition as a career and low stability, identified that conventional gender norms that expect less economic contribution from women worked as a blessing in disguise for them.

Dulini, owner of a software development company, expressed her thoughts below about how the family was less concerned about her career shift as they didn't expect any financial gains from her anyway.

One good thing about being a female is that your family does not have many expectations from you, about the wealth creation and financial gains. That makes your life easier in a way…if you take my fiancé, he had more financial responsibilities towards the family. His family depended on him financially so a sudden shift in careers and taking a financial risk was not easy for him.

In summary, it is evident that conventional gender norms still predominantly shape societal attitudes about women and their engagement and visibility in male-dominant spheres such as digital entrepreneurship. However, there is a gradual shift in societal attitudes about women and their engagement in FDE, which positively changes factors for FDE. Most interestingly, akin to the phrase "every dark cloud has a silver lining", women began to identify positive aspects generated through patriarchal gender norms, which made their pathway for FDE more streamlined.

7.7.1.3 Cultural Influences -perceived occupational prestige disparity

Based on the data analysis, occupational prestige disparity perceived by society emerged as a key restraining factor that hinders FDE. While discussing their journey as "digital entrepreneurs", respondents highlighted how they were being affected as broader society perceives digital entrepreneurship as a low-status career. Sri Lanka is a very educationally heavy country; therefore, respondents' parents mostly aspire for their children to become doctors, engineers,

lawyers, etc. This narrow perception of career success results in undervaluing entrepreneurship as a viable career path. While low status given to entrepreneurship was common, it had more adverse effects as it intersected with perceptions of entrepreneurship as a male domain. Ranuki voiced how they were trained from a young age to perceive entrepreneurship as a low-status career for individuals lagging behind in educational accomplishments.

...there was my teacher in my primary school, and whenever boys in the classroom got low marks or forgot to do their homework, she used to make fun of them by saying, "if you do not study well, you will end up being a "bada thadi mudalali" overweight and unwell shop owner…I started realising that through her words, she was trying to position entrepreneurship as a low-grade, inferior career.

Due to the strong cultural expectations, collectivist values, and nature of the educational system, parental influence on the career choices of individuals in Sri Lanka is much higher. As a result of the strong parental influence, individuals emphasised that they are mostly compelled to take up jobs and careers that are desirable to their families, which inevitably discourages their entrepreneurial aspirations. Parents always encouraged children to take up those careers that had been taught to them as prestigious and desirable for females. This resulted in the continuation of the cycle of parents encouraging children to take up conventional professions rather than trying out non-conventional prospective careers such as digital entrepreneurship. Especially for girls, the influence they get from their parents related to the critical decisions of their lives is much higher. The below quote from Gayani substantiates the huge pressure from parents that drives women to pursue careers that are desirable for their parents, which inevitably excludes digital entrepreneurship.

You know, we have a very family-bound culture. Our parents, especially, think they have to make choices on behalf of their daughters. According to my parents, the best career for me was teaching. Well, that is the career they perceive as ideal for a decent girl who was brought up in a well-mannered way.

Insights from the respondents signify that societal members lack awareness about this novel field of digital entrepreneurship, which is a significant reason why they tend to perceive FDE as a low-status career. Sharing their experiences, respondents stated how difficult it was to convince their parents that they were engaged in a career that deserved some dignity. Furthermore, respondents said that due to this lack of awareness, sometimes people can generate surreptitious talk about their income generation, which may be detrimental. In some instances, despite the strong desire to pursue digital entrepreneurial ventures, some respondents patiently continued their highly regarded jobs until they were married, as they were well aware of the importance of having a high-dignity job when securing a suitable marriage partner. In the quote below, Sithmi explained the lack of awareness about digital entrepreneurship within their family circles.

Sometimes, explaining to your family that you are doing something worthwhile is difficult. You may not be dressing up well and not going out to work, and you are not getting your monthly pay cheque anymore, and as a result, they tend to think you are idling.

Even though the lack of dignity for all types of jobs is something Sri Lankans are immune to living with, the perceived disparity in occupational prestige tends to discourage the pathway for FDE. Especially this lack of recognition and respect for FDE as a viable career can adversely impact educated women's engagement in FDE. Therefore, creating a society that respects all occupations is essential to ensure that individuals are not confined to professions conventionally perceived as prestigious.

7.7.1.3 Economic Instability

Though South Asian countries are no strangers to uncertain economic conditions, Sri Lanka has experienced its worst financial situation in recent years as the economy was struck consecutively by the COVID-19 pandemic and an economic recession. Based on the empirical evidence, turbulent economic conditions prevailed in the country, resulting in having a mixed impact on FDE. Respondents underscored that COVID-19 inspired them to start their digital businesses. Internet penetration marked a significant growth during COVID-19, which offered a

beacon of hope for digital businesses. From one end, women who were already engaged in entrepreneurial ventures had to embrace digital technologies as physical businesses were no longer an option. On the other hand, the pandemic resulted in widespread job losses, putting much economic pressure on women to search for alternative means of revenue generation. Also, these job losses provided individuals with free time to explore business opportunities. Thus, when taking the overall effects of the pandemic-induced job losses, it tends to result in FDE's propagation. The quote below illustrates Malmi's experience of being driven to start a digital business due to an unexpected condition caused by COVID-19.

It felt like we had fallen from the mat to the floor. Our company was closed for many weeks. I was desperate for some revenue... When I was checking Facebook on my phone, I saw girls using their skills and sewing beautiful frocks…selling these things on Facebook, for which there was a good demand. So, with that, I was wondering if I could also sell something.

Following COVID-19, the country went through its worst economic recession, again inspiring many women to start online businesses. Despite the general conception that recessions discourage businesspersons from starting and continuing new business ventures (Bartik *et al.*, 2020; Panda and Dash., 2014), it was interesting to find out that during this economic recession time, many women began focusing more seriously and working hard on their digital businesses than ever before. Due to the financial pressure from skyrocketing prices and the loss of jobs due to the collapse of industries, they started perceiving the value of the income generated by digital businesses to an unprecedented extent. Adding on, import bans and dollar crises discouraged the presence of imported goods in the marketplace and opened pathways for local business owners to fill the lacuna in the marketplace. Sometimes, men in families who previously played the breadwinner role went through the loss of jobs or pay cuts, and for these families, the economic contributions received through their digital businesses were the only income source. Gayani, who runs an online store of curated gifts, expressed her thoughts on the impact of economic conditions on her digital business.

I witnessed the closing down of many small businesses at the beginning of last year. Like me, most of them have followed the bandwagon and started digital businesses during the pandemic, and now they are closing. It really made me afraid...My husband was on the edge of losing his job, so this business was so precious for us to survive. I couldn't think of closing it down. I worked so hard to increase my sales. I worked around the clock and responded to FB messages even if I got those at midnight.

While digital entrepreneurs expressed their thoughts about the positive influence of economic turbulence, they have not forgotten to share their experiences about how the economic susceptibilities negatively influenced their businesses. One of the most discouraging aspects emphasised by the respondents was the increasing technology prices. Like many other developing countries, individuals in Sri Lanka mostly rely on mobile phones to connect to the internet. However, respondents mentioned that import bans and the dollar crisis resulted in extreme price hikes for mobile phones, a significant barrier to engaging in the digital world. Adding on, the increase in the prices of raw materials, the shortage of raw materials, and the shortage of labour due to people migrating to look for green pastures and reducing the buying power of people resulting from the economic recession have also resulted in adverse influences towards digital businesses. The below quote by Sithmi serves as an example of the negative impact of turbulent economic conditions.

Economic instability has really hit us hard, especially when it comes to getting raw materials. Threads and other essentials we need are mostly imported, and the skyrocketing costs are squeezing our profits…..products I sell are not essential items. So, customers will only buy these if they have some savings after spending on their basic needs. As people must spend much money on essential items, they don't have money to spend on these things.

Thus, the data indicates that while women got much inspiration to engage in FDE through the unexpected storms of economic turbulence, unfavourable market conditions emerged due to the country's adverse economic state, which also hindered FDE.

7.7.1.3 Policy influences: State sector inadequacy towards digital entrepreneurship

Except for a handful of high-tech digital entrepreneurs who conveyed favourable views about the support given by the government agencies by organising hackathons, acceleration programmes, and other training opportunities, the majority of respondents believed that governmental programmes and services are not sufficiently catering to uplift the conditions. Respondents particularly highlighted the state sector inefficiencies related to providing necessary advice, consultancy, and productive services on business registration, providing educational and training opportunities tailored to uplift the conditions of women, and access to funding and grants. As women's capacity to pursue education, wealth generation, and engage in networking activities are confined due to an array of structural barriers, their ability to assume the role of digital entrepreneur is heavily influenced by the state sector support. Empirical evidence demonstrated that government officials are particularly lagging in the competencies and knowledge required to deal with the requirements of digital entrepreneurial businesses. As digital businesses represent a broader spectrum with diverse business models, when catering to the needs of these businesses, government officials need to be updated on this novel field. Based on certain respondents, even though policy-level changes and inclusions were undertaken to cater to the digital businesses' needs, government officials dealing with people at the grassroots level do not know enough about these new initiatives. They indicated that most government officials are trying to follow the same protocols they follow for physical businesses when catering to digital businesses. Anoma's voice echoes the view held by most respondents who participated in the interview.

Government officials in these offices need to train more. They should be trained in digital entrepreneurship. My relative's daughter once went to the divisional secretarial office in another area to ask about business registration. She got so fed up as officials were completely unaware of the drop shipping concept.

Another striking aspect unveiled by the respondents was prejudicial government services and practices, which resulted in benefits for those initiatives being confined to a few. Respondents emphasised that they hardly got any tangible support from government programmes despite the

ostensible claims made by the government that they are working on women's empowerment and uplifting digital technology in Sri Lanka. Respondents explicitly mention that they hardly received any information related to these training programmes, awareness campaigns, or any other support initiatives conducted by government agencies. Five respondents who are into high-tech digital entrepreneurial businesses have specifically alleged the preferential treatment given by the government towards certain female digital entrepreneurs. They believed that most training, accelerators, and other initiatives provided by government agencies are confined to the same set of individuals, and those programmes' benefits are not far-reaching to a broader community. Contradicting viewpoints presented by the high-tech female digital entrepreneurs in the country signify that there are problems related to resource allocation, even within this very small segment. The quote below is from an interview with Imesha, who expressed her dismay about the preferential treatment offered by government agencies.

Government organisations are currently doing some award ceremonies targeting digital business girls. But unfortunately, we see the same faces again and again. No new faces at all…What I feel is that sometimes, the projects, recognitions, and appreciations are biased towards one segment, and they are not being communicated to the grassroots levels. I spoke to many girls who are outstanding digital entrepreneurs, but they didn't know about most of these programmes and are not bothered because they know how all these awards are given…

From a macro perspective, state sector support for FDE is below the desired level, restraining women's participation in FDE. Even though a handful of high-tech female digital entrepreneurs expressed positive sentiments about the state sector initiatives, there are concerns about equitable distribution due to nepotism and favouritism within the state sector.

7.7.1.3 Policy influences: Suboptimal educational policies

Another imperative finding derived from the data analysis, which reflects the state sector inefficiencies, is suboptimal educational policies. All the female digital entrepreneurs who participated in the study echoed that the country's prevailing education system is insufficient to

create a healthy environment for FDE. They believed that Sri Lankan students are not getting enough education and training related to IT due to poor educational policies. Also, they emphasised a major vacuum in entrepreneurship education and novel developments such as digital entrepreneurship. Additionally, limited career guidance and professional development support were other major challenges for these women. Some of them stated that even at the university level, they were not clear about the career paths available to them and how they needed to be developed to take up those positions. Cultures shaped by deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms often perceive women as misfit to take up career roles where things can be more debilitating for digital entrepreneurship as a career due to the double-gender bind. Therefore, in such cultures, women must be given sufficient career guidance to inspire them to engage in digital entrepreneurship. Additionally, participants highlighted that ineffective and conventional evaluation systems used at schools that primarily focus on rote memorisation should be changed. Respondents emphasised that those students who had gone through this substandard education will not get enough opportunities to enhance their creativity and related skills, which are essential for them to thrive as digital entrepreneurs. Priyanka verbalised her thoughts below, emphasising the deficiency of IT education as a restraining force for FDE.

...I mean, our education system does not provide the best sought of IT literacy...we don't really educate people about it, even our school curriculum doesn't have much of, you know?...I don't think there's anything to do with digital, for that matter.

The quote below from Imesha's interview highlights the inadequate support given by schools and universities regarding career guidance and professional development.

I started my degree in Business Administration at a well-known private campus but dropped out because I didn't see a path for me. Because if you want to start a professional career, it's good, but there was nothing in it for me…I didn't know how to choose a degree, I didn't know what to do next, I didn't know anything about myself and my skills, and I didn't know anything about what I wanted.

Overall, the respondents emphasised that the mediocre educational system in the country negatively influences women's desire to engage in digital entrepreneurship. All the respondents unequivocally voiced their thoughts about the need to update the education system to ensure that it caters to the needs of contemporary society.

7.5.3 Individual Identity Factors

The extent to which larger society can influence FDE aspirations of women can vary based on the other demographic characteristics that intersect with their gender. When deriving the theoretical constructs based on the empirical data related to individual identity factors, the theoretical lens of intersectionality was also considered. Individual identity factors refer to other social ascriptions such as ethnicity, geographic location, socioeconomic class, and marital status, resulting in women having differential experiences within their gender group (Trauth, 2002; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Analysing the interview data in depth by integrating insights from the IDTGIT and intersectionality themes have emerged that specifically relate to how gender intersects with other social markers and influences FDE.

7.6 Impact of Intersectional Gender Dynamics in FDE

Based on the exploration of the impact of individual identity factors on FDE, it was unearthed that women's participation in FDE is influenced by their intersecting identities. Based on the findings, while FDE offers a promising avenue for women whose marginalisation is exacerbated due to their intersectional identities, there are instances where digital platforms reinforce the intensified marginalisation experienced by these women. While respondents acknowledged that amplified marginality experienced by women as their gender intersects with other social ascriptions such as ethnicity, social status, and geographical location drives them to pursue FDE, they highlighted some cases of women's participation in FDE being restrained by their intersectional identities. Thus, the findings derived from analysing empirical evidence through the theoretical lenses of IDTGIT and intersectionality reveal that there are mixed views

that digital platforms promote meritocratic characteristics in specific contexts, while in others, they do not.

7.6.1 FDE is a Great Leveller to Intersectional Marginalisation

Respondents elaborated on how the exacerbated marginalisation they experienced as their gender intersects with other social ascriptions drove them to engage in FDE. Respondents from the rural areas discussed their difficulties in finding employment opportunities, which limited their economic engagement. It has been noted that due to the limited industries and poor infrastructure in rural areas, finding jobs is much more challenging. Further, they emphasised that unemployed rural women migrating from economically stagnated areas to more sophisticated urban areas is not a straightforward option as stereotypical gender norms are more rigidly enforced in these rural areas. For these women with limited employment opportunities, market accessibility offered by digital platforms to engage in business activities provides a way out. Gayani (below) shared her experiences about the lack of career opportunities related to challenges in her hometown and how it drove her to engage in digital entrepreneurship. She reached a broader audience and sold her products to as many customers as possible without geographical barriers, thanks to the affordance of digital technologies. Whilst the below quote was from Gayani's conversation, it is aligned with most of the other respondents from rural areas

When you think about finding jobs in my area it is next to impossible. Even those jobs that we find require major time commitments as those require travelling for hours from home to the office... In our villages buses are available every 1.30 hours, and we have to come to the road at least by 5 am just to make sure you catch a bus. So, you either take up this digital business or just idle without doing anything.

Three of the respondents who represent the minority ethnic groups in the country have also shared their experiences of how their identity as women from an ethnic minority influenced their economic activities. They explained how they overcame the augmented barriers they experienced due to social structures by engaging in digital businesses. Fathima, who represents the Muslim

community, explained the restrictive practices, particularly affecting Islamic women, that result in the limited presence of Muslim women in public physical spaces.

For Muslim women, contact with males is not encouraged. When it comes to travelling also, we have restrictions where it is expected that we travel with a mahram (male with close blood relationship). All these will make it challenging to think about work outside the home. So, doing this as a home-based business is much more practical.

Many respondents also emphasised that they could thrive as female digital entrepreneurs regardless of their formal education. While respondents acknowledge the value of formal education in thriving as digital entrepreneurs, they specifically mentioned that the learning opportunities they got through the digital platforms helped them bridge the gaps related to formal education. Thus, respondents believed that those thinking of digital entrepreneurial pathways should not be bothered by their lack of educational accomplishments.

Another nuanced finding related to the study is how FDE works as a viable career option for high-class women restricted from participating in the workforce. In most instances, high-class women experience restrictions in getting involved in employment, as their families perceive it as inappropriate for their elite social status. Even though these women attain a good education, their parents and husbands prefer that they do not pursue careers outside the home. Respondents highlighted that based on their family backgrounds, their employment engagement may be a disgrace to the family, as it signals that the family is financially struggling. Furthermore, these respondents emphasised that they are expected to engage in philanthropic activities, cultural pursuits, or social events that uphold the family's prestige instead of focusing their efforts on outside employment. Even related to family businesses, these respondents emphasised that men in the family are expected to be active leaders while women take more passive roles. For these upper-class women, the flexibility offered by digital ventures was a great outlet to attain work-related gratifications such as attaining a positive identity independently, professional fulfilment, and personal independence. In most instances, intersectionality mainly focuses on the experiences of the women who face exacerbated economic and resource constraints as their gender intersects with other social markers. However, this finding provides a nuanced understanding of how

economically privileged, resourceful, high-class women also become victims of deprivation due to their social class and how digital entrepreneurship works as an empowering pathway for them. The below quote from Asangi explains how her elite family background limits her career aspirations and how digital entrepreneurship worked as a promising pathway for her.

..because of our family background, we don't do eight to five jobs… even related to our own family businesses, we girls played the role of passive directorships, and all what we have to do is signing and all, where male members in the family, run businesses. We are expected to attend all the family functions and socialising events etc. where being too busy with the business is the men's department…So, I wanted to do something that kept me going but was very light at the same time, so that's why I started an online business.

In summary, the responses from the informants acknowledge that FDE works as a powerful way out of exacerbated challenges experienced by women due to their intersecting identities. Results have particularly emphasised how digital entrepreneurship paved the way to break the barriers of social exclusion experienced by women in rural parts of the country through digital entrepreneurship. Furthermore, results unearthed the role played by digital entrepreneurship in overcoming the unique struggles of upper-class women. However, there are instances where women experience exacerbated marginalisation due to the intersecting identities, which results in restraining their FDE journey, which is explained below.

7.6.2 Digital Spaces Uphold or Exacerbate Intersectional Marginalisation

Despite the dominant narrative of respondents that digital entrepreneurship works as a great leveller, some other responses shed light on how unleashing the potential offered by digital technologies and engaging in FDE may differ among women as their gender intersects with different social markers. Several participants commented on the amplified challenges experienced by women in rural areas related to the usage of digital technologies. Based on the study's findings, FDE adoption in rural areas is mainly confined due to a lack of access to digital technology, infrastructure issues, and digital literacy. Respondents highlighted that poor digital infrastructure in remote areas hinders rural women from starting digital businesses. Respondents elaborated on

their experiences with poor connectivity issues in rural areas, making technology-involved tasks more difficult for rural communities. The comments made by respondents suggest that high technology prices have a more detrimental effect on the technology usage of rural women whose economic standing is more deleterious. Furthermore, rural communities experience a high deficiency in digital literacy due to the asymmetries in resource distribution within the country. Respondents voiced that due to the digital divide prevailing in the country, women from rural areas are far from attaining the benefits of digital entrepreneurship. Jenifer, who is running a digital media broadcast business, elaborated on the situation rural communities experienced regarding internet connectivity.

... it's very sad to say that our network coverage is really low. I mean, the world is moving at a fast pace in terms of technology, but it's pathetic that people in remote areas are still climbing trees just to make sure they have the coverage to make a phone call. Isn't it ironic in the era of technology?

Several respondents discussed the disadvantages they face due to the language barrier. Lack of proficiency in the English language made it difficult for them to harness the full potential of digital businesses. Some respondents mentioned that their usage of technology devices and platforms is confined due to language issues, as most resources and materials in digital spaces are still in English. On the other hand, even though these respondents reached a broader audience, they find it challenging to deal with these customers due to their lack of English proficiency. For these female digital entrepreneurs, the language barrier works as a glass wall where they can see potential customers but accessing them is hindered due to their limited English proficiency, which deters effective communication and outreach. The below quote from Anoma clarifies how the transformative potential offered by digital entrepreneurship differs among women due to language proficiency.

As I said earlier, English is the other issue. Sometimes, there are girls out there who buy the product from me at a very low price, and they sell it through their pages to ex-pats and all as they are competent in English. So, the language is a big problem for me.

In summary, empirical evidence indicates diverse viewpoints about how the variation among women impacts their engagement in digital entrepreneurship. The majority of respondents perceive that the affordances of digital technologies enable women to navigate exacerbated challenges due to intersectional identity despite the minority having a contradictory viewpoint. A minority of respondents favour the idea that the transformative potential of digital entrepreneurship varied among women as their gender intersects with other social markers such as the place they live, language competency, and digital literacy. Overall, it can be concluded that digital entrepreneurship works as a great leveller for Sri Lankan women with intersecting identities.

7.7 Social Changes Activated Through Women in Digital Entrepreneurship

Upon exploring the factors that drive women to disrupt the status quo and engage in FDE, the researcher investigated how women becoming digital entrepreneurs simultaneously activates transformation in the social context and power structures in the larger society. Based on the findings, it became evident that with the reinforcement received by the broader array of factors falling under three main categories: individual influences, individual identity, and environmental influences, women can pursue their digital entrepreneurial ventures by leveraging digital affordances. Ultimately, it was unearthed that female digital entrepreneurs who realise their entrepreneurial dreams while navigating the barriers in the conventional context can be accredited as active change agents who develop new articulation of what it is to be a woman and female digital entrepreneur in the Sri Lankan context. Based on the findings, women who took bold steps to engage in digital entrepreneurship broadly endorsed that they could attain personal growth by levelling up their skills, competencies, knowledge, social exposure, and economic state through FDE. Further, it was commonly acknowledged that they experienced an overall elevation of their recognition due to their engagement in FDE. Another noteworthy outcome is that it marked a process of powerful transformation in the social context where women have started evolving as leaders and authority figures in digital entrepreneurship driven by growth objectives. This marks a key milestone in the literature on female entrepreneurship. The findings deviate from the widely held general conception that women's businesses are less growth-oriented or a secondary income

source (Du and Henrekson, 2000; Ahl, 2006). Adding on, many of these women have emphasised that they are actively seeking opportunities to engage as role models and mentors for other women to push the gendered boundaries and reform patriarchal ethos which are essential for the progress of an egalitarian society. Based on the above findings, it is evident that the proliferation of FDE comes with a lot of transformative potential to create a society with gender equality. However, contradictory views were also expressed by some respondents where they emphasised that digital spaces sometimes result in reinforcing the patriarchal gender norms and existing inequalities in society. Thus, in certain instances, women's participation in digital business entails the mere transference of gendered social structures they face in the physical realm to the digital spaces.

7.7.1 Female Digital Entrepreneurs as Active Change Agents

The interviews highlighted that women who assume digital entrepreneurial roles act as catalysts for transformational change in social structures, resulting in gender norms being redefined to create more conducive conditions for women. It describes how these women deliberately or inadvertently work to challenge the gendered ethos and initiate transformation that results in reshaping social structures.

Marking growth as a person

The general sentiment among the respondents was that becoming a female digital entrepreneur was a beneficial transformation for them as it marked significant growth as a person. Respondents elaborated on how to sharpen their skills by engaging in digital businesses. Jyothika, a young female digital entrepreneur, explained how her new role enhanced her proficiencies.

...it broadened my knowledge of software development. Now, I can develop applications for other companies. So, this urged me to attain knowledge in that sector. Not only my knowledge of software development but also my knowledge of financial management improved me a lot. You know, doing a digital business needs much financial discipline.

They also acknowledged the social exposure they attained through engaging in digital entrepreneurship. Prior to starting digital businesses, most of these women were confined to their homes, with limited presence in public spheres and limited interactions with different groups, cultures, or communities. Thus, their presence in digital platforms enables them to deal with diverse social settings and attain broader experiences than before. Sajeewani reiterates how her business helped her get more social exposure, which also echoes other respondents' voices.
I would say I'm moving a little faster than the rest of the people. And I'm trying to get to know people in the world because this is my passport to connect with lots of other people in other countries rather than travelling physically, which is a cost.

Furthermore, based on the empirical data, it was unearthed that digital businesses enable women to attain financial gains and engage in wealth accumulation, the benefits of which are beyond economic value. Respondents shared their experiences on how these gains uplift their independence, increase decisional autonomy, improve self-confidence, enhance the conditions of their families, and increase their status within the families. The quote below is from Anoma, who spent most of her life as a housewife before starting her digital business. She explained her true sentiments about the financial independence she attained as a digital entrepreneur.

You can earn a good amount of money and support your family. As a person who played the role of full-time housewife for years without getting any payments, I know the value of financial independence. The money I earn from this business makes me really happy.

In light of the empirical evidence, it was unearthed that most respondents have been able to attain work-life harmony as they pursue FDE instead of another career. It is noteworthy that Sri Lankan women identify motherhood as the central role in their lives and do not take it as a burden or constrictive. They treasure motherhood and are conscious that motherhood requires much dedication; therefore, they have a better perception of careers that enable them to earn without compromising on their motherhood responsibilities. As digital entrepreneurship provides a pathway to maintain a delicate balance between economic engagement and performing the ‘good mother/good wife’ roles, women perceive it as a good career for women. This balancing act has

been considered one of the biggest accomplishments by most respondents who participated in the interviews. The below quote from Kenu encapsulates the sentiments of many respondents who grew up in Sri Lanka with the entrenched ethos of mothers as central figures in maintaining the well-being and stability of the family unit.

I can manage both my personal life and my work career front. So, I see my kids growing. I have time to feed them. I am available for them. So, I think my entire family is happy about my decision to run this business.

Findings substantiate that female digital entrepreneurs who navigated the challenges of male-dominated digital entrepreneurial pathways and marked their foothold in FDE enhanced their personal growth. This enhanced personal growth gave them discretion and the ability to make their life choices more independent than earlier. This can be identified as the first step in pushing gendered boundaries.

7.7.1.1 Elevating Recognition of Women

Respondents elaborated on how their new digital entrepreneur identity elevated their value and recognition within their families and communities. They explained how they experienced a sense of pride through enhanced family well-being and economic contribution, which was noticed and appreciated by others. Respondents showcase their happiness about being able to spend their money on their children's education, health, and well-being, which helps them attain a sense of accomplishment and gain more recognition in the family sphere. Furthermore, they talked with much pride about their contribution to the development of the Sri Lankan economy. Especially as the study took place in a period when the country was going through its worst economic crisis and the media was continuously emphasising the importance of citizen's contribution towards the economy, respondents took much pride in talking about their financial contribution by providing employment opportunities, bringing dollars into the country and paying taxes. The below quote by Imesha reflects the common sentiments of most of the respondents regarding their economic contribution.

I have given jobs to many others through this. I bring dollars to the country. If you remember, at the peak of the economic crisis, the media always emphasised the importance of dollar revenue to the country, and at that point, as a digital entrepreneur, I felt so happy about my contribution to the economy.

Most respondents emphasised that becoming a female digital entrepreneur enabled them to redefine their identity in the realms of family, kinship, and broader society. They mentioned how the family members entrusted them with responsibilities, included them in the decision-making process, started speaking highly of them to others, and listened to their views rather than abruptly rejecting them. Sithmi shared her experience of how her new identity has uplifted her image within the family sphere, which is elaborated on in the quote below.

Recently, one of my uncles approached me and sought my advice about the possible pathways available for my cousin's sister, who just finished her advanced level. Earlier, they perceived me as a black sheep who was not able to attain anything as I was not excelling in education.

Respondents acknowledged that becoming a female digital entrepreneur elevated their social recognition to a greater extent. They expressed how their presence in public spaces, which were previously deemed as male territories, was appreciated by the local communities with time. Specifically, women who started high-tech digital businesses experienced great pride due to the augmented social recognition as they survived and thrived in extremely male-dominant sectors. Furthermore, as they are catering their digital products mainly to the international market, they have been able to deal with the outer world and mark their presence in a global context. Lakmali remarked about how she ended up being an internationally recognised woman thanks to the successful digital entrepreneurial venture she started.

You know, it's like crazy. You go to ABC (the name of a renowned company in Asia), meet the chairman, and get the deal. Who gets to say that, right? I mean, I have big companies (she

named a few of those companies) using my system. I can talk to them; they know me by my first name. I am a lady from a small Island known by big brands worldwide.

The striking aspect is the immense role played by award ceremonies, public events, and conferences to uplift female digital entrepreneurs' recognition. Respondents explicitly mentioned that due to the lack of awareness within their families and society related to digital entrepreneurship, their success was not celebrated by the family to the same extent to which they celebrate the success of a family member who takes up a conventional job role. In certain instances, due to the lack of awareness and visibility of activities associated with digital entrepreneurship, the local community may tend to generate surreptitious talk about "earning money in an unethical way". However, respondents highlighted how the public events recognising female digital entrepreneurs gave them and their careers more recognition among the affinal kin, neighbourhood, and local communities, which is crucial for legitimising digital entrepreneurship. The below quote from Devasharee showcases how imperative these events and awards are for attaining social legitimacy.

...with two or three projects, I just raised some money, and I said to my father, I'm going to open an office space, then he got scared. He asked me, " From where are you going to get money?

...I won the awards for young entrepreneurs and emerging women technopreneurs (she specifically named all the awards she won). I was called as a keynote speaker in the research symposium at a reputed university in Sri Lanka, and then only my dad was like, okay, she must be doing something good and that's why the university has invited her.

The interview data revealed that FDE has elevated the respondent's social recognition within their family circles. When it comes to the broader community, women are marking an increase in their recognition, albeit the change in acceptance and recognition are uneven. Enhanced recognition of women signals women's liberation from the subjugation they experienced. It also signals the endorsement of the new role of women by the broader society, which is imperative to gender parity. Findings have further substantiated the significance of public events to highlight the

impact made by these women on society, which is imperative to elevate the recognition of female digital entrepreneurs.

7.7.1.2 Becoming digital entrepreneurs driven by growth objectives

One of the most striking themes that emerged from the data was that the majority of the respondents who took part in the interviews had a pronounced desire for the growth and development of their businesses, which is contrary to the much-accepted female underperformance hypotheses (Du Rietz and Henrekson, 2000). While some respondents shared their ideas about expanding their digital businesses further by adding more products to the portfolio, expanding to new markets, and engaging in continuous research and development to explore growth strategies, others emphasised that they wanted to expand their digital businesses into physical retail spaces. It is visible that the business experience and the wealth accumulated through digital businesses gave them knowledge, financial capital, and confidence to expand their businesses. Some respondents indicated that they initially started these business ventures as a secondary income source or hobby. However, as they matured with the business, they became inspired to develop and expand their businesses. Interestingly, even during the worst economic phase of the country, these women's business growth objectives were not deterred.

Reflecting the female digital entrepreneur's desire to become business leaders, respondents stated their commitment to work as responsible digital entrepreneurs who will focus on profit and the well-being of the broader society. Some respondents explicitly discussed their greater attentiveness toward legal aspects related to the business and showcased a higher commitment to legal compliance. Additionally, a handful of participants elaborated on an interesting aspect of the need to regulate digital entrepreneurship to specifically restrict the exploitative marketing practices used by female digital business owners. Fathima expressed her ridicule towards sympathy marketing tactics used by some women.

The other biggest issue is that we women should differentiate between beggars and digital entrepreneurs. It is pathetic to see women who call themselves online businesswomen trying to show their difficulties and family issues and asking people to buy their products as a favour. I tell

this to young girls all the time: if you are an entrepreneur, please try to sell a solution to your customers, not your problems. This kind of sympathy marketing efforts will put a black mark on all the hardworking women trying to attain something through digital platforms.

These results suggest that contemporary female digital entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka are making conscious efforts to reshape the conventional businesswoman identity as they take a more expansion-focused approach to their businesses and industries.

7.7.1.3 Female digital entrepreneurs are evolving as role models.

Due to the flexibility, broader reach, and networking facilities offered by digital platforms, these women have overcome the barriers they had earlier in terms of networking and role modelling. As a result, some female digital entrepreneurs are stepping forward to guide and assist young girls who are inspired to become digital entrepreneurs. Proving the women's strong desire for social well-being, some respondents who have high-tech digital entrepreneurial businesses run their own CSR programmes and work closely with apex bodies to inspire other women to pursue their entrepreneurial goals. Additionally, it became evident that many of the respondents selling products through digital platforms are top contributors to the social networking groups focusing on empowering women. While women accept the problem of "queen bees" in the FDE, they emphasise their conscious efforts to work as role models and mentors for other women. The quote below from Bhagya showcases her impact as a role model for other women.

…encouraging and supporting women to grow is one of my goals. And I do it daily. I know the pain of not having someone to look up to. When I started my online cake business, very few were out there. I never had the luxury of getting their advice or support because they were reluctant to share the information with me…We have this cake bakers' group where I write my story; whenever someone asks for help, I try to talk to them and clarify their doubts.

As role models play a pivotal role in generating interest and boosting women's confidence to step into digital entrepreneurship, evolving role models will positively influence the growth of FDE and reinforce women to engage in economic activities. Adding on, these female digital

entrepreneurs sharing their experiences and success is critical to gaining social legitimacy towards female digital entrepreneurs.

Together, these results provide important insights into how FDE works as a major catalyst for levelling the playing field for both men and women, irrespective of their gender. It mainly showcases how women can increase their financial independence and build competencies through digital entrepreneurship without deviating much from socially accepted gendered behaviours. As these women can maintain a delicate balance between income-generating activities and the home front, they are well-received by their families and local communities and inspire many other women. Thus, their balancing act enables them to negotiate and reshape deeply rooted socio-cultural expectations of gender gradually without significant societal opposition.

7.7.2 Reinforcement of patriarchy in the digital context

Although most respondents acknowledge that their participation in FDE enables them to leverage technology to address gendered challenges, resulting in a transformation of society, some controversial viewpoints are also present. It is worth noting that certain responses indicate digital technologies reproduce or rather exacerbate gendered inequalities and reinforce the patriarchy in the digital context as well. Several respondents indicated that engaging in FDE calls for tiresome multitasking, and they mentioned that their situation had become much worse than what they had experienced before. Those respondents who retired from full-time employment and started digital businesses especially emphasised that they receive much less family support than earlier due to their families' lack of understanding of digital businesses. Many of these respondents were engaged in their businesses while staying home, so they found it difficult to switch roles, unlike earlier. They explained how their families expected them to attend household activities, as they now stay home. Due to this situation, female digital entrepreneurs are getting loaded with the responsibilities of dutiful wives, motherhood, and the stress of running a business, which calls for working extended hours, sleep deprivation, and compromising emotional and physical well-being. Sachini, who shifted from full-time corporate employment to full-time digital business, shared her thoughts about the exhausting task juggling that she has to undertake as a digital entrepreneur.

.....when I moved to this online business, things changed drastically. My parents and husband no longer consider me a working woman. They think that as I am no longer working, I can attend childcare and house chore activities on my own. You won't believe that sometimes I barely get any sleep, especially during the peak season. During the daytime, I look after the baby, and at night, I work on my orders.…

Respondents also shared their sentiments about the hostilities they experienced in the digital environment. Many of them have become victims of cyberbullying and stalking, and they have also explained how the regulatory void in cyberbullying made their experiences more cumbersome. Converse to the widely acknowledged disembodied cyberspace (Martin and Wright, 2005), allegedly free from gendered identities, empirical evidence showcases that individuals' increased interaction in the digital environment makes their gender identities more visible, and resultant experiences are similar to or exacerbated than what they experience in the physical world. Business dealings particularly require regular interaction, communication, and networking with potential customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders, regardless of the environment. Even though the entrepreneur's face-to-face physical interactions have been negated through digital spaces, to unleash the potential of digital entrepreneurship, individuals need to be entangled with the technology, which gives visibility to their gender identity, and their womanhood makes them more vulnerable to cyberbullying. The quote given below from Imesha echoes the voices of many women.

... many people have fake profiles and create groups with ulterior motives. One of my friends joined a group that was pledged to say it's a woman-only group and you can discuss your issues openly as no one will judge you. Her business is related to ladies' undergarments, and she has posted her business on this page assuming it's a women-only group, but it is not. The pathetic part is that from the next day onwards, she was getting so many nuisance calls and sex messages from men, which was traumatic.

Another noteworthy finding derived from the interviews with female digital entrepreneurs who sell products and services through digital platforms is that their businesses are mainly confined to sectors catering to female customers. Their businesses operate in feminised sectors

such as food, fashion and clothing, horticulture, beauty, and personal care, which are highly competitive sectors with low margins. This reflects a situation where offline gendered practices and inequalities are also reproduced in the virtual world, as the core of the gender inequalities still persists. From one end, these women may lack the competencies and capital required to step into more advanced sectors with high-profit margins and on the other end, due to the entrenched cultural practices, women find it more comfortable and safer to deal with other women, which results in women being confined to feminine businesses in the virtual world as well. What Ranuki has mentioned in the interview encapsulates women's confinement to female customer-oriented industries.

Our main customers are household women. I deal mainly with housewives, middle-aged women, and all. For them, they always prefer talking to me personally and telling me their requirements and getting personalised attention. So, I feel more comfortable with their queries.

Adding on, the empirical evidence further showcased that even though women have marked their presence as digital entrepreneurs, most of the technical functions of the businesses traditionally dominated by males are still being carried out by male family members. Regarding businesses that sell through digital platforms, most respondents indicated that their husbands or boyfriends were primarily responsible for the digital marketing campaigns. Other than that, several respondents indicated that the business's finance function and tax filing were handled by male family members. Surprisingly, a handful of respondents acknowledged that they were not paying much attention to their digital technology capabilities, even though they have digital businesses, as male family members mainly handle their business presence on digital platforms. Gayani shared her genuine thoughts about her lack of competencies in digital technologies and how it did not affect her due to her supportive tech-savvy husband.

I am not a tech-savvy person, but that has never bothered me. My husband was taking good care of promotional campaigns. In fact, he is the one who does all the Facebook and Instagram promotions. Thanks to him, I never had to be bothered about technological aspects of the business.

Overall, the empirical evidence indicates that digital entrepreneurship provides many viable pathways for women to root out the challenges they experienced in the brick-and-mortar world, but it cannot be considered a complete leveller. While some respondents favour digital entrepreneurship, enabling women to uplift their state, others have emphasised that things are still skewed towards men and gendered inequalities and marginalisation of women, which persist in the physical world, are reproduced or exacerbated in the digital world. This sheds light on the fact that to harness the full potential of digital entrepreneurship as a great leveller; efforts should be made to refine the greater structural and cultural conditions that make the conditions more conducive for women.

7.8. Integrated Findings

After deriving the quantitative and qualitative findings, both were integrated to attain more profound insights from multiple methods. Even though the integration of findings is imperative in the mixed method approach, to attain a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem and to minimise the limitations of one method with the use of the other method (Fielding, 2012) in extant literature, there is no consensus over the best practices to be followed when integrating the findings (Bryman, 2006; Venkatesh, Brown and Sullivan, 2016). In this study, efforts were taken to generate narratives or theoretical statements by integrating the findings derived in light of the qualitative and quantitative data sets termed "meta-inferences" (Younas, Fàbregues and Creswell, 2023). Deriving strong meta-inferences will only be possible if the qualitative and quantitative strands produce good inferences in light of the well-developed study design. Throughout this study, the researcher made considerable efforts to evaluate and ensure the quality of both quantitative and qualitative strands.

The study focused on three research questions to explore the emancipatory potential of FDE, and given the nature of the study, the explanatory sequential mixed method approach was used. To address the first two research questions on change factors that drive women to engage in digital businesses and to investigate how the intersectionality of multiple social ascriptions shapes FDE intentions, the researcher used both quantitative and qualitative strands with the purposes of

triangulation and complementarity. The third research question focuses on investigating whether FDE activates positive social change, and it was addressed solely through the qualitative approach to ensure the parsimony of the study. As validating the results through triangulation and providing deeper insights into the quantitative findings through the qualitative study were the primary purposes of implementing the mixed method approach, a triangulation protocol (O'Cathain, Murphy and Nicholl, 2010; Venkatesh, Brown and Sullivan, 2016) was used to derive meta-inferences. Aligning with O'Cathain, Murphy, and Nicholl (2010), the findings from the quantitative and qualitative studies related to each key construct were listed on the same page and evaluated to see whether the findings followed convergence, complementarity, dissonance, or silence. Convergence refers to a situation where both qualitative and quantitative methods produce the same results; complementarity refers to when findings from both strands taken together provide deeper insights; dissonance refers to when findings contradict each other, and silence stands for when findings were only derived from one method and not from the other method. Thereafter, the integrated findings were leveraged to create plausible meta-inferences that go beyond the general inferences attained through a mono-method study.

The table 7.6 below illustrates findings derived from the quantitative and qualitative studies related to each key construct and whether those findings are convergence, complementarity, dissonance, or silence to each other.

7.8.1 Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Table 7.6 Integrated Findings

	Relationship	**Quantitative Findings**	**Qualitative Findings**	**Integration**	**Conclusion**
H1	Economic instability →FDEI (+)	✓	Respondents unevenly emphasised that COVID-19 pandemic-induced economic susceptibilities and the economic recession positively influence women to commence and dedicate more to their digital businesses. Some respondents explained that the increase in the price of technologies and raw materials, customers' low buying power, and import bans negatively impact women in digital entrepreneurship.	Complementary	Unstable economic conditions have an uneven positive influence on FDE.

H2	Attitude towards women → FDEI (+)	✓	Despite the persistent conventional gender norms, respondents acknowledged the gradual change in societal attitudes about women and their engagement in digital entrepreneurship. With the deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms that appreciate "male breadwinner", women have less pressure to transform from another stable job to FDE.	Complementary	The gradual transition of societal attitudes about women as a positive change that drives women's DEI.
H3	Perceived formal institutional support → FDEI (+)	×	Almost all respondents criticised the lack of state-sector support and state-sector inefficiencies toward FDE, except for two high-tech digital entrepreneurs. Findings have further substantiated the poor educational policies that do not support digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka.	Convergence	Lack of state sector support for the proliferation of FDE. Qualitative findings further elaborated on poor educational policies that work as restraining factors for uplifting women's DEI.

H4	Role models → FDEI (+)	*As the role model variable does not meet the validation criteria, it was removed from the quantitative data analysis.*	Whilst the long-standing issue of lack of role models and mentors persist, findings substantiate that women experience more exposure to role models and mentors through the wide array of social networking sites and other digital platforms.	Silence	Despite the proliferation of social networking sites and digital platforms that are gradually closing the chasm, the long-standing issue of a lack of female role models and mentors persists.
H5	Family support → FDEI (+)	✓	Respondents emphasised the significant role played by family support in realising their digital entrepreneurial dreams. They particularly attributed the immense role male family members (fathers, husbands) played as a key change factor in driving women to navigate barriers.	Complementary	While family support was recognised as positively influencing FDE engagement, familial male allies were identified as key drivers of women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship.

H6	Previous work experiences → FDEI (+)	×	Both positive and negative experiences (including workplace harassment, discriminatory practices, etc.) women had as employees work as a reinforcing factor for women's engagement in digital businesses.	Dissonance	Previous work experience reinforces women to engage in FDE. While the quantitative study rejects the impact of previous work experience on FDE, qualitative study findings substantiate the impact of both negative and positive work experience on intention to engage in FDE. In the quantitative survey, a screening question asking whether the respondent had worked before significantly reduced the number of respondents, which may have impacted the statistical power. Thus, it is pivotal to further explore the impact of previous work experience through quantitative analysis.
H7	Digital self-efficacy → FDEI (+)	✓	Respondents showcased a very high confidence in their digital technology capabilities, which has	Convergence	Women's increased digital self-efficacy results in them unleashing the potential of digital entrepreneurship.

			positively influenced their digital entrepreneurial journey. Regarding the respondents who sell products through digital platforms, their digital capabilities are mainly limited to social networking sites.		
H9	Internal motivation → FDEI (+)	✓	Inner psychological drives, namely the desire for innovation, the desire to capitalise on a hobby, the desire to realise a dream, the desire for work-life balance, and the desire to serve society, are key internal motives influencing women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship.	Convergence	Inner motives serve as the primary catalyst for FDE. Women value internal desires more than the sheer need for financial gains.
H10	Marriage → FDEI	✓	Household responsibilities and motherhood urge them to look for flexible careers that enable them to prioritise a family. Thus, marriage will positively impact	Convergence	FDE offers a viable economic avenue for married women whose economic engagements are confined due to cultural expectations.

			women's digital entrepreneurial intention.		
H11	Socioeconomic status → FDEI(+)	×	The impact of socioeconomic status on female digital entrepreneurial intention is multifaceted. • Most respondents emphasised that pursuing a digital business is less constrained by their economic status. • Digital businesses are a great way out for upper-class women with limited career choices due to their affluent lifestyles.	Complementary	Findings substantiate that economic status does not impact females' participation in digital entrepreneurship. The nuanced finding is that FDE offers a way out for affluent women belonging to upper-class families whose economic engagements are confined due to their family status. This needs to be further explored to attain a better understanding.
H12	Educational attainment→FDEI(+)	×	Respondents were of the view that their educational attainments did not play a role in their digital entrepreneurial aspirations.	Convergence	Higher educational attainments are not consistent with female digital entrepreneurial intentions.

H13	Geographic location (urban area)→ FDEI(+)	×	The situation for women in rural contexts is complex. From one perspective, the lack of career opportunities in these areas and more stringent gender norms drive women to take up digital entrepreneurship. On the other hand, the prevalence of the digital divide and language divide is a restraining factor for women's pursuit of digital businesses.	Dissonance	The impact of living in rural areas is mixed. Living in a rural area works as a reinforcing factor as well as a constraining factor for FDE. Dissonance in the findings calls for further exploration of the impact of geographic location on digital entrepreneurship.
H8	Fear of failure moderates Digital self-efficacy → FDEI	×	Respondents did not explicitly mention the fear of failure as a prominent concern influencing their decision-making processes related to entrepreneurship.	Convergence	Women's participation in FDE is not restrained by the fear of failure.
H14	Marital status moderates Internal motivation → FDEI(+)	✓	After marriage, women experienced relative relaxation from the strict social scrutiny they had experienced before. Some of them received immense support	Convergence	A new social identity attained with marriage elicits women's motivation to engage in digital entrepreneurship.

			from their husbands to start their dream ventures without being stuck in socially desirable job roles.		
H15	Geographic location moderates Internal motivation → FDEI(+)	✓	Living in a rural area: lack of career opportunities and more stringent gender norms in rural areas amplify women's motivation to engage in digital businesses.	Convergence	Geographic location further reinforces women's inner drives to commence and run digital businesses. Unfavourable conditions in the rural context, specifically, reinforce women's pursuit of digital businesses.
	Impact of ethnicity towards digital entrepreneurship.	-	Women who belong to ethnic minorities emphasised how they were able to navigate the intersectional barriers they experienced through FDE.	Silence	The quantitative study does not address the relationship, and even the qualitative finding is driven by a handful of respondents who belong to ethnic minorities. Therefore, future research should be conducted specifically to explore the ethnicity of women's DEI.

	Perceived occupational prestige disparity	-	Society's attitude towards digital entrepreneurship as a low-status career is a restraining factor for women to pursue digital entrepreneurship.	Silence	A strong finding from the qualitative study is the social perception of digital entrepreneurship as a low-status career, which works as a restraining factor for FDE. To generalise the finding, it is worthwhile to explore the quantitative method further.
	Impact of virtual networking groups for FDE	-		Silence	Members of the virtual networking groups (specially dedicated to women) are recognised as significant people who reinforce women's participation in FDE, which calls for further research on this area.

As illustrated in the above table, findings from one component are juxtaposed with those from the other component to triangulate the findings. Results showcased much convergence and complementarity but also discovered some dissonance and silence. It is not surprising to have silent findings in the explanatory mixed-method studies, as the whole purpose of this approach is to attain a deeper understanding of the relationships substantiated by the quantitative approach through the qualitative approach, which generates new insights beyond what is already found through the quantitative study. These silent findings provide deeper insights into change factors that drive women to pursue digital businesses and how intersectional differences affect their experiences.

Related to the dissonance findings, possible explanations for the deviations were provided, and for the silent findings, the need for further exploration was highlighted. Even though the dissonance findings are problematic as they bring the researcher to a dilemma, these findings are unavoidable in mixed studies (Perlesz and Lindsay, 2003; O'Cathain, Murphy and Nicholl, 2008; Slonim-Nevo and Nevo, 2009). Dissonance findings do not always replicate a fundamental problem in the study; rather, they provide much richer insight into the research question than relying on the mono method, and it open up new scholarly insights (O'Cathain, Murphy and Nicholl, 2008; Pluye *et al.*, 2009). The dissonance between the findings related to the effect of previous work experiences can be explained as a limitation owed to the quantitative method. In the survey questionnaire, the researcher incorporated screening questions to filter the individuals who had previous work experiences, and this resulted in a significant reduction of the responses for the measures about previous work experiences, which could have adverse effects on the statistical power. This may have created a deleterious impact on detecting subtle relationships between the variables. Thus, it was recommended that future research explore the impact of previous experiences on female digital entrepreneurial intention to attain a more robust understanding. The second discrepancy that emerged related to the geographical location where the hypothesised relationship of living in an urban area exerts a positive influence on FDEI was rejected in the quantitative study, but the qualitative study substantiated that geographical location has an impact on FDEI. The inconsistency was owed to the greater complexity related to the geographical location uncovered through the qualitative study, where the findings emphasised the multifaceted effects of living in a rural area instead of an urban area. In both these instances, as

the qualitative component provides stronger explanations of the subjective and complex world of women, the researcher has taken the qualitative findings on board while emphasising the need to conduct more studies in the future. In mixed-method studies where each study component produces contradictory findings, researchers' decision to give less weightage to the quantitative findings and opt to go ahead with qualitative findings was justified by previous scholars (Jick, 1979; Perlesz and Lindsay, 2003). Thus, the triangulation protocol enabled the researcher to bring the findings from both components together, which paved the way for deriving meta-themes.

7.8.2 Development of Meta-Inferences

Several meta-inferences were derived with careful integration of the qualitative and quantitative strands. Both inductive and deductive theoretical reasoning were used concurrently in deriving meta-inferences (Miller, 2003), and resultant meta-inferences can be explained based on the theories of IDTGIT, intersectionality, and digital affordances. Aligning with the IDTGIT, ***the first cohort of meta-inferences focuses on the macro-environmental factors*** that drive FDE. Unstable economic conditions and the shift away from traditional cultural norms and values were the positive change factors driving women to engage in digital entrepreneurship. Conversely, policy influences were recognised as restraining factors for women to engage in digital entrepreneurship, and cultural perception of digital entrepreneurship as a low-status career also hindered women's aspirations to pursue digital entrepreneurship. ***The second cohort of meta-inferences supports the individual influences of the IDTGIT***. Individual influences are comprised of two aspects, namely personal influences and personal characteristics. The immense role of the familial male allies, the increased access to role models and mentors through social networking sites (despite there being more room for improvement related to role models and mentors), opportunities to get connected with members of the social networking groups, and the positive effects of previous work experience on aspiring women to take up digital businesses were identified as personal influences. On the other hand, individual influences particularly focus on internal motives and digital self-efficacy as positive change factors that drive women to engage in digital entrepreneurship***. Third, meta-inferences were derived based on the IDTGIT and intersectionality.*** Third, meta inferences mainly focus on the impact of the intersectional identity

towards women's participation in FDE. The findings of both quantitative and qualitative studies favour the fact that FDE provides a great way out for women who experience intersectional marginalsation. However, converse to the majority perspective, a handful of respondents brought to light the disadvantaged positionality they experienced due to their intersectional identities, making it difficult for them to pursue digital entrepreneurship. The meta-inferences derived by integrating the findings are summarised in Table 7.7 below.

Table 7.7 Summary of Meta-Inferences

	Meta-Inferences	**Supporting Constructs**		**Theory**
		Sub Constructs	**Constructs**	
1	Economic fluctuations reinforce female participation in digital entrepreneurship.	Economic influences	*Environmental Influences*	IDTGIT
2	Cultural norms and values about women and their engagement in economic activities have unevenly transformed, which has resulted in the reinforcement of FDE. Conversely, the general cultural perception of digital entrepreneurship as a low-status career negatively influences women's engagement in it.	Cultural influences		
3	Support and resources provided by government agencies and the country's educational system have had agitating effects on women's digital entrepreneurship.	Policy influences		
4	Greater familial male allies positively influence women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship.	Personal Influences-		

		Significant People		
5	With the rise of social media networks, women found a platform to connect with role models and mentors, positively influencing women's digital entrepreneurial aspirations. However, the lack of role models and mentors remains a restraining factor.	Personal Influences-Significant People	*Individual Influences*	IDTGIT
7	The individuals ' previous work experience (both negative and positive experiences) positively impacted women's engagement in FDE.	Personal Influences-Significant Life Experiences		
9	With higher digital self-efficacy (DSE), women will be more driven to start and run digital businesses.	Personal characteristics-DSE		
10	Internal motives have positive effects on FDE. Intrinsic motives are equally important (in certain instances, more critical) for women's participation in FDE than externally imposed economic pressures.	Personal characteristics-Internal Motives		
11	Marital status directly and indirectly affects FDEI. Married women have a much higher desire to engage in FDE than unmarried women. Moreover, marriage may strengthen the positive relationship between internal motives and FDEI.	Personal demographics		

12	Digital entrepreneurship works as an excellent outlet for upper-class women to overcome the barriers they face due to class-based gendered expectations.	Personal demographics	*Individual Identity*	IDTGIT and Intersectionality
13	Living in a rural area has a mixed impact on FDE. From one end, limited employment opportunities and relatively strict gender norms, which pressurised women to live more nested lives, reinforce FDE. On the other end, the digital and language divide makes it more difficult for women in rural areas to pursue digital entrepreneurial careers.	Personal demographics		
14	Intersectional marginalisation experienced by women belonging to ethnic minorities drives them to engage in digital entrepreneurship as they perceive it as a meritocratic space.	Personal demographics		
15	Financial status and educational attainments do not work as a restraining factor for women to engage in digital entrepreneurship.	Personal demographics		

With the reinforcement received by the women from multifaceted aspects, they work on starting and running their digital businesses by utilising the action possibilities offered by digital technologies, which has been **elaborated briefly in light of the digital affordances theory.** By leveraging technology to address the broader social challenges, women not only liberate themselves but they will be able to transform the broader society. Therefore, the third research question was mainly focused on how women's engagement in FDE activates a social change that results in the gradual transformation of conventional gender norms and creates a more favourable environment for women. The table 7.8 below illustrates the findings related to this third research

question. Findings derived from the empirical data are inconclusive, reflecting the complexity and multifaceted nature of social phenomena. Some responses take the position to substantiate how FDE transforms unfavourable social and cultural practices. Based on the responses, it became evident that women who pursue digital entrepreneurial businesses experienced a transformation in their lived realities, both within the family and in broader society, which may provide necessary reinforcement for a gender-egalitarian society. Conversely, it was also revealed that the experiences of female entrepreneurs in the digital context are no different or rather exacerbated than what they experienced in the brick-and-mortar world.

Table 7.8 Summary of the Findings Related to the Last Research Question

Key Findings
16. Women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship results in positive changes and uplifts women's conditions in the family, kinship, community, and broader society realms. These changes will contribute to gradually transforming cultural tropes about gendered identities.
17. Although digital entrepreneurship provides empowering potential, due to its social embeddedness, women's experience is still somewhat marred, adversely affecting their journey in finding legitimacy as digital entrepreneurs.

Ultimately, it became evident that even though women's navigation of digital spaces activates a social change and uplifts the conditions for women, it cannot be considered a "wonder drug". Thus, it is imperative to acknowledge the socially embedded nature of digital entrepreneurship, which makes it difficult to completely eradicate the living realities experienced by women in the brick-and-mortar world. It is visible that in certain instances, social and structural inequalities faced by women in the physical world persist or are rather exacerbated in the virtual context as well. Therefore, it needs to be understood that with the reinforcement received by specific individual and environmental influences and personal demographic factors, women can accomplish their entrepreneurial aspirations by utilising digital technology even in unsupportive social and structural conditions, and their engagement in FDE results in activating social change even though the challenges are not entirely eradicated. It is evident that the social changes they

activate through their new role paved the way for a series of changes in social norms and hierarchies in the given context.

7.9 Conclusion

The first half of the chapter discussed the findings derived from 25 in-depth interviews conducted with female digital entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka, and the second half presented the study's integrated findings. At the inception, reflections based on the data collection were reported, followed by an elaboration of the data analysis procedure and the process of establishing the validity. Findings derived from the qualitative data were discussed with the support of powerful quotes. Ultimately, conclusions derived from the quantitative and qualitative studies were integrated, aligning with the triangulation protocol (O'Cathain, Murphy and Nicholl, 2010), enabling derivation at meta-inferences.

Chapter Eight

Discussion

Chapter 8: Discussion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter will critically analyse the findings of the study in light of the research objectives and position the findings in the broader literature and theoretical framework. The findings will reveal the environmental, identity, and individual factors influencing women's participation in FDE and how their entrepreneurial journey fosters positive social change. These outcomes will be then compared with the previous literature to recognise consistencies, controversies, and nuances. At the outset of the chapter, research objectives will be outlined. Then, the key findings and implications derived from the study will be reviewed to ensure that the findings align with the study's objectives. Then, the unique contributions from empirical study will be discussed. The proposed theoretical model derived from the empirical findings will be presented with relevant theoretical explanations. The chapter will conclude with an overview of the key findings of the study, which establishes a strong foundation for the subsequent discussion of the study's implications in the following chapter.

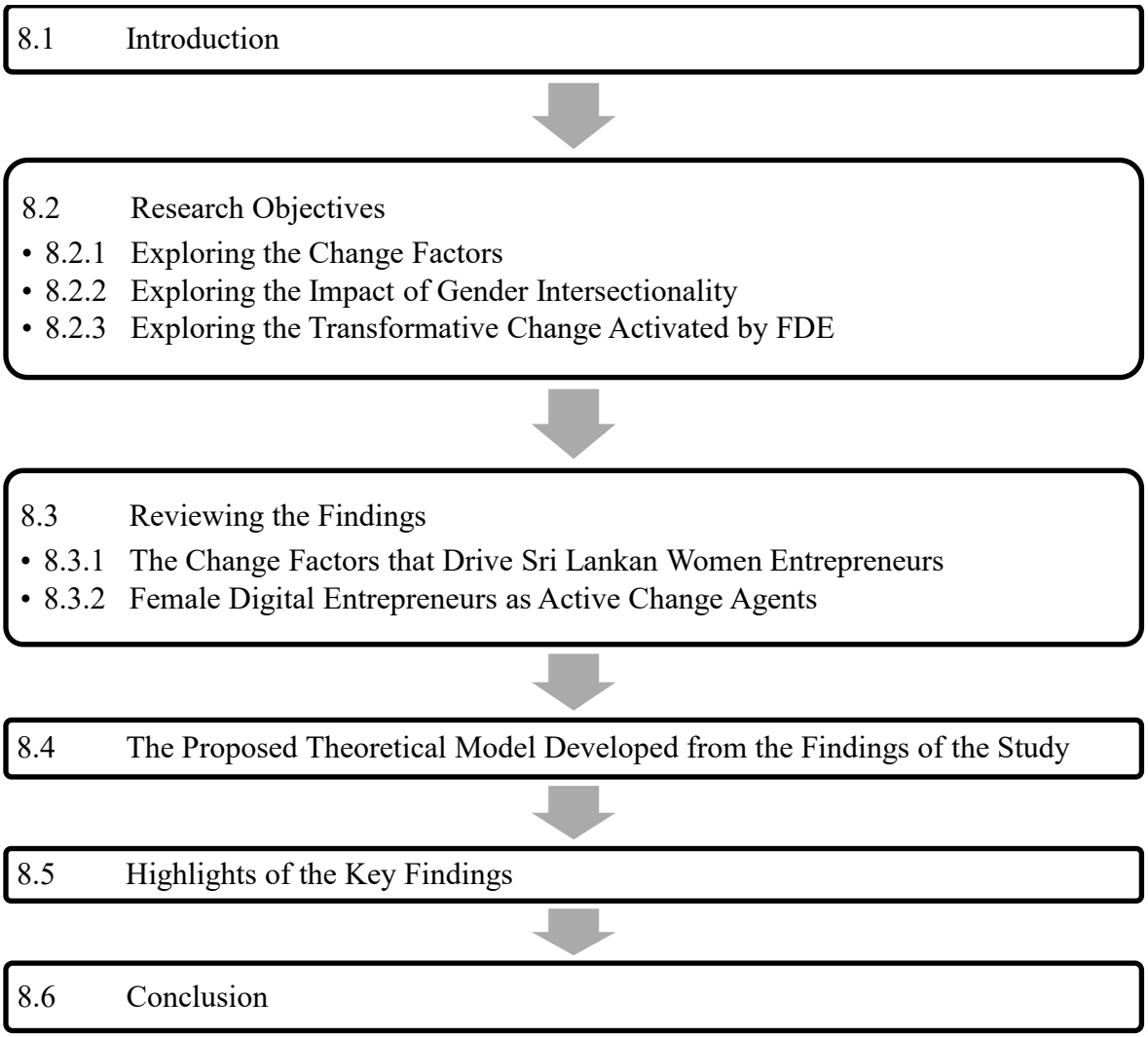

Figure 8.1 Chapter Structure

8.2 Research Objectives

Both digital technology and entrepreneurship are male-dominant fields. Therefore, women in digital entrepreneurship are subjected to a double-gender bind (Grangeiro and Neto, 2023), which leads to the perception of women as less legitimate actors in the digital entrepreneurial context (Dy, Martin, and Marlow, 2018; Kelly and McAdam, 2022). Despite oppression and marginalisation, women continue to pursue digital entrepreneurship. Therefore, exploring their experiences in these journeys is valuable. The review of the extant literature enabled the identification of the gaps in the present understanding of FDE, and research objectives were formulated based on these gaps.

Researchers believe that further studies on the emancipatory potential of FDE could greatly benefit the field of FDE. Many have also highlighted that the FDE manifests differently depending on the context and that future studies should pay attention to the context embedded nature of FDE (Kelly and McAdam, 2023; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025). Further, the need to explore emancipation as a process that involves a two-way interaction between FDE, and environmental context was confirmed by the existing literature. Thus, by bridging these gaps in the already available literature, this study predominantly focused on the factors that influence women to break the status quo and participate in FDE and explore how women's engagement in FDE results in the activation of social change in the unique context of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the researcher focused on exploring how the transformative potential of FDE differs among Sri Lankan women as their gender intersects with other social ascriptions. The researcher primarily drew upon two theories: the Individual differences Theory of Gender and IT IDTGIT (Trauth, 2002; Trauth and Connolly, 2021) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Additionally, two theories, namely, the role congruity theory of prejudice (RCTP) (Eagly and Karau, 2002) and digital affordances (Nambisan, 2017) were used to gain further insights for this study. The study followed an explanatory sequential mixed method approach to attain a comprehensive understanding. As FDE is an emerging area, phase 1 of the research primarily focused on conducting five informal interviews to understand how things are happening at the grassroots level, building a network, and identifying possible challenges that may occur when performing the study. Phase 2 of the study involved

testing the framework developed based on IDTGIT and intersectionality to examine the change factors that drive women to engage in digital entrepreneurship despite unfavourable conditions. Phase 3 consisted of semi-structured interviews to explore how and why these change factors influence FDE, examine the effects of intersectional identities on women's navigation of digital entrepreneurship, and discover the transformative potential FDE offers. The entire process was carefully engineered to meet the three main objectives of the study, which are outlined below.

8.2.1 Exploring the Change Factors

The study's first objective was to explore the factors influencing Sri Lankan females to engage in digital entrepreneurship despite its male dominance. Exploring entrepreneurship research through an emancipatory lens means viewing the entrepreneurship process as a way to create change. This involves breaking down or reorganising the unfavourable structures in society, which will help individuals from different social groups create new opportunities (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009). Breaking a stable structure that marginalises specific social groups and promoting new conditions will only be achievable through substantial reinforcing factors. Therefore, when exploring the emancipatory potential of FDE, it is imperative to pay greater attention to change factors that influence women to break the status quo and participate in FDE. Furthermore, this objective aligns with the call for female entrepreneurship studies to go beyond the barriers for female entrepreneurs and explore how they navigate unfavourable conditions (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023; Deng *et al.*, 2025).

This objective was attained through the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. As no prior study has predominantly focused on the myriad of factors that influence FDE, the researcher focused on the broader research arena of gender parity in the IT sector to identify the antecedents that influence women to navigate digital environments. Trauth's (2002) IDTGIT was recognised as a framework that identifies a wide array of factors that reinforce FDE. Carefully reviewing the extant literature and drawing insights from the preliminary informal interviews, variables that fall under environmental, identity, and individual influences were identified as per Table 8.1. Relationships among variables were determined based on extant literature, and the quantitative study focused on testing the hypothesised relationships. Proposing an extension to the

IDTGIT, Trauth and Connolly (2021) emphasised that it is imperative to go beyond identifying static factors and explore how and why these factors work in a particular way. To fulfil this requirement proposed by Trauth and Connolly (2021), the qualitative study aimed to attain deeper insights into how such change factors affect FDE.

Table 8.1 Proposed Factors Influencing Women's Engagement in DE

High-Level Constructs	**Subcategory Constructs**	**Variables**
Environmental Influences		Economic instability
		Attitude towards women
		Perceived formal institutional support
Individual Influences	Personal influences-significant people	Family members' support
		Role models' and mentors' support
	Personal influences-significant life experiences	Previous work experiences
	Personal characteristics	Digital self-efficacy
		Fear of failure
		Internal motives
Individual Identity	Personal demographics	Marital status
		Geographic location
		Education
		Socioeconomic status (SES)

8.2.2 Exploring the Impact of Gender Intersectionality

The second objective of the study was to examine how gender intersects with other social ascriptions and influences digital entrepreneurial pathways of women. To gain a deeper understanding of women's experiences in real life, it is essential to move beyond perceiving women as a homogeneous group. It is equally important to examine how their intersecting identities influence their experiences. The existing literature highlights the limited academic focus

on intersectionality and underscores the necessity of conducting studies on FDE that take intersectionality into account (Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017b; Dy, Martin and Marlow, 2018; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Adikaram and Razik, 2023; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). Appreciating the imperativeness of the intersectionality perspective, the researcher explored how women's gender intersects with social ascriptions such as marriage, education, geographic location, and socioeconomic status as well as how their intersectional identities influence their liberation through FDE. The impact of intersectionality was examined through both quantitative and qualitative research studies. In a quantitative study aimed at determining the intersectionality effects, as outlined by Oney, Cole, and Sellers (2011), the most prominent social ascriptions were treated as separate variables, and their effects were tested. This enabled the avoidance of complexities around the conceptual framework that affects parsimony. A qualitative approach was also employed to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of intersectionality, as it is considered the most suitable method in intersectionality studies (Scott and Siltanen, 2007; Bauer *et al.*, 2021; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024).

8.2.3 Exploring the Transformative Change Activated by FDE

The third research objective aimed to explore how FDE activates transformation in the broader society. Activating broader social change that creates more favourable conditions for marginalised segments by changing the collective norms is at the heart of the emancipatory perspective (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018; Trivedi and Petkova, 2022). Thus, when exploring the emancipatory potential of FDE, it is imperative to explore how the conditions in the larger society get improved when women navigate digital spaces (McAdam, Crowley, & Harrison, 2019; Wiig, Schou, and Hansen, 2023). Alkhaled and Berglund (2018) claim that, a "broader level of social change" demarcates emancipation from empowerment. This is because empowerment focuses more on eradicating inequalities at the individual level while emancipation focuses on uplifting broader social conditions. Thus, exploring the emancipatory potential of FDE requires examining the broader changes elicited by women's engagement in FDE. When exploring the broader level of social transformation, it is imperative to focus on the individual, family, community, and the larger society level changes as all these realms are interrelated and contribute to the broader societal transformations. Trivedi and Petkova (2022) emphasised that individual-level

empowerment attained by women through entrepreneurship enables them to transform the collective norms in society and establish new norms favourable towards women. The researcher relied solely on a qualitative approach to address this research objective as it allows for a deep dive into the respondents' perspectives to gain a nuanced understanding that could not be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone (Van Burg et al., 2020).

Overall, since the study focused on achieving a more comprehensive understanding of FDE as an emancipatory pathway in the Sri Lankan context, the first objective was to gain deeper insight into why and how individuals take their first steps on the digital entrepreneurship path. The second objective aimed to investigate how intersectionality affects an individual's engagement in digital entrepreneurship, and the third objective was to explore the broader societal-level changes triggered by FDE. Addressing these three core objectives can bridge the gaps in the existing literature. This involves examining the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurship as a holistic process, exploring the context-embedded nature of entrepreneurial activities, and investigating the impact of intersectionality. Figure 8.2 below provides a clear and concise visual illustration that outlines the study's objectives and their interconnectivity, offering a structured overview of the topics covered throughout the study.

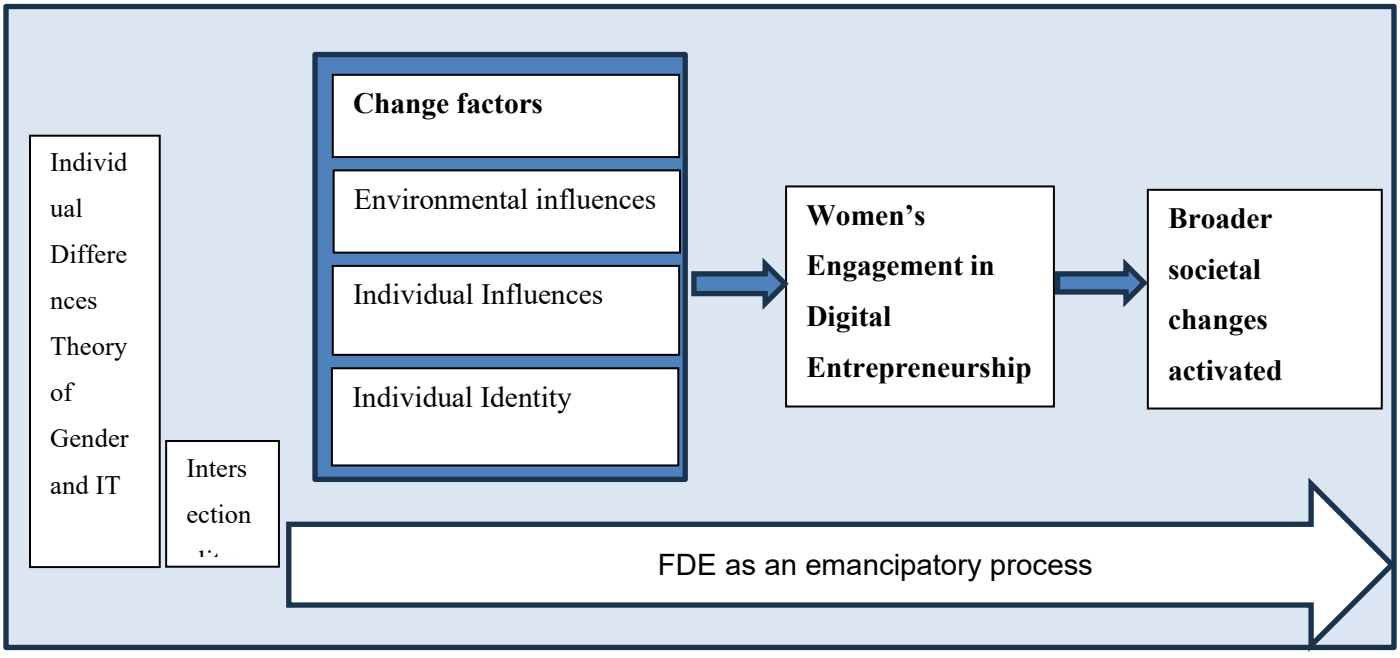

Figure 8.2 Flow of the Study

8.3 Reviewing the Findings

This section connects the key findings of the study to its research objectives and aligns the findings with those of the existing literature. It attempts to provide a clear insight into how the study's findings fit into the broader academic context of FDE.

8.3.1 The Change Factors that Drive Sri Lankan Women Entrepreneurs

8.3.1.1 Environmental Influences

The integrated findings of the study indicate that economic instability and attitudes towards women have a positive impact on FDE. Conversely, the integrated findings of the study also reveal that formal institutional support functions not as a fortifying force but as a restraining force for FDE in the Sri Lankan context. The findings also provide a nuanced perspective on societal attitudes towards women: while changing societal norms are encouraging greater involvement, the enduring presence of the traditional 'male breade women's experiences in paradoxical ways. Notably, both progressive shifts and persistent traditional views simultaneously influence women's engagement in FDE. The qualitative analysis also revealed that digital entrepreneurship is often perceived as a low-status career with limited visibility, which acts as a restraining factor for women considering FDE. Furthermore, while previous literature has documented negative state sector support for female entrepreneurship, this study uncovered specific challenges faced by female digital entrepreneurs related to state sector, including negative experiences with incompetent state officials due to their lack of understanding about the FDE, systemic inefficiencies, and prejudicial practices related to FDE. These findings provide a nuanced understanding of how unique environmental conditions in the Sri Lankan context influence FDE.

8.3.1.1.1 Economic Instability

The integrated findings of the study substantiate that turbulent economic conditions encourage women to engage in digital entrepreneurial activities. For example, the study's outcomes indicate that, amid the country's worst economic crisis, characterised by extremely high inflation levels and severe fuel and energy shortages resulting from weak government policies and mismanagement (Sharma *et al.,* 2022), FDE thrives in Sri Lanka. This finding aligns with previous literature where Langevang *et al.* (2015) show how female entrepreneurship in Uganda emerged and developed mainly owing to the war, crisis, and structural adjustment during the 1970s. Similarly, Bullough and Renko (2017) emphasised that in precarious regions, women business owners are relatively less affected by the outside economic uncertainties of the country as they are moulded to absorb uncertainties and catastrophes to a greater extent. This is because these women's entrepreneurial journeys have trained them to navigate challenges arising from the inherent obstacles that are closer to home. Furthermore, the findings align with a study conducted by Paul and Sharma (2013), which found that the global economic crisis marked a catalyst for the proliferation of household-based female entrepreneurs. In addition to this, a study by Buratti, Cesaroni, and Sentuti (2018) uncovered that Italian women entrepreneurs demonstrated better resistance and dealt with the crisis more effectively than male entrepreneurs. Alhothali and Al-Dajani (2022) also emphasised that FDE in the Saudi Arabian context showed greater drive and resilience during the economic instabilities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The outcomes of the interviews provided a deeper explanation as to why FDE thrives in the midst of economic instabilities. It was revealed that pay cuts and job losses inflicted by economic crises have led individuals to become entrepreneurs out of sheer necessity. The rise in entrepreneurial activities during uncertain economic conditions due to the contraction of labour markets was substantiated by previous studies as well (Constant and Zimmermann, 2004; Acs, 2006; Payne, 2015; Vegetti and Adăscăliţei, 2017). For example, hyperinflation made it difficult for families to survive on their conventional single income earning sources, which resulted in most housewives considering engaging in economic activities within their capacity. Thus, women constrained by traditional gender norms found FDE a viable economic option, as it allows them to generate income while balancing work and home responsibilities. Explaining the proliferation of

women's entrepreneurship in Ghana during the economic crisis, Langevang *et al.* (2015) emphasised that rising prices and declining income in the family setup made women's engagement in economic activities indispensable, and as a result, women embraced entrepreneurship more than ever before. Furthermore, the dollar crisis in Sri Lanka, which resulted in import bans and product crises (UN Women, 2022) opened new market opportunities for women to pursue businesses. While FDE marked a visible growth during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alhothali and Al-Dajani, 2022; Kogut and Mejri, 2022; Kelly and McAdam, 2025), it was amplified by the market opportunities that arose for local products due to the dollar crisis in the country. In this context, the pandemic-induced proliferation of FDE has resulted in cultural legitimacy towards FDE. This normalisation of digital business created a more conducive environment for females to thrive as digital entrepreneurs despite the challenging economic conditions. In addition to the positive effects of the economic crisis, some interviewees highlighted the negative impact of the economic crisis on their digital entrepreneurial journey. These challenges were due to the increased prices of raw materials, limited access to technology, and reduced buying power of the customers. While the findings of the study confirm that uncertain economic conditions encourage women to pursue FDE, it advances understanding by illustrating how a mix of necessity-driven entrepreneurship, unexpected emergence of market opportunities and greater resilience of women in South Asian countries like Sri Lanka results in the proliferation of FDE despite economic adversities.

8.3.1.1.2 Societal Attitudes about Women

The findings substantiate that societal attitudes about women positively impact FDE in the Sri Lankan context. Despite this positive impact, there is also a certain complexity in the relationship between societal attitudes about women and their engagement in FDE. On the one hand, changes in societal attitudes about women has resulted in favourable impact on FDE. On the other hand, societal attitudes about women that remained static or unchanged have also had a favourable impact on FDE. Therefore, the perceived positive impact on FDE does not come solely from favourable attitudinal changes towards women in society. This can be identified as a special contextual condition in Sri Lanka.

The quantitative study revealed that the relationship between societal attitudes towards women and female participation in DE is positive. Additionally, the data gathered from the interviews highlighted uneven changes in societal attitudes towards women. This means that over time, attitudes towards women's engagement in FDE have taken a positive turn though some negative attitudes continue to persist. Overall, societal attitudes have positively reinforced female participation in Sri Lankan digital entrepreneurship. This finding is consistent with the previous studies that emphasise the change in societal attitudes about working women as a pivotal factor determining women's economic participation (Gubernskaya, 2014; Bussolo *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, when exploring gender equality in the IT sector, previous studies emphasised that a transformation of views about women and work resulted in reinforcing gender parity in the IT sector despite the prevalence of traditional norms (Joshi and Kuhn, 2001; Trauth and Quesenberry, 2006; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Furthermore, the findings of the study are congruent with a study conducted by Zobel (2024) that underscores transforming societal attitudes about women as the preliminary step towards enhancing overall gender parity in the entrepreneurial landscape. As the findings revealed the positive influence of favourable societal attitudes about women, and its support to proliferating FDE, it is imperative to examine the causes that create favourable societal attitudes about women and their engagement in DE. Opening the economy and the capitalist development during 1977-87 in Sri Lanka can be considered a significant drive that changed societal attitudes about women (Bandarage, 1988). Many transformational changes ranging from the Mahaweli Development Program, the Free Trade Zone, labour export to the Middle East, tourism, to import liberalisation took place in this period. Consequently, women's labour force participation was encouraged as it became a means of meeting the employment opportunities and affording the new lifestyle that evolved because of the open economy (Goonatilake, 1985; Bandarage, 1988). Similarly, the economic turbulences the country experienced have compelled its citizen to consider dual-income earning (Leonce, 2020), which has also led to gradual changes in societal attitudes toward women. These changes marked a gradual shift from societal attitudes about women as mothers and homemakers, where women were perceived as docile and controllable segments, to economic contributors.

While economic conditions reinforced positive societal attitudes about women engaging in income-generating activities, deep-rooted gender norms in the South Asian context pressurise

women to prioritise motherhood and familial responsibilities while maintaining harmony and balance in the family (De Silva *et al.*, 2021; Mishra and Dey, 2022). Thus, DE is recognised as a viable economic option for women to cater to this demand for prioritising the family while engaging in income-generating activities. Currently, individuals can utilise the properties of technology to transcend the traditional boundaries of space, geography, and time, thereby generating flexibility. FDE literature recognises this as one of the significant affordances offered by digital technology (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; Kelly and McAdam, 2022). This flexibility offered by DE is one of the foremost reasons behind positive societal attitudes about DE as a viable career path for women, where they are no longer required to choose between career and family. Qualitative findings substantiate that women strongly believe that digital entrepreneurship is a viable pathway due to this flexibility. Ughetto *et al.* (2020) also state that women have positive attitudes towards DE's potential to provide work flexibility and overcome mobility restrictions. Thus, it is clear that female digital entrepreneurial aspirations are reinforced by societal attitudes towards women in digital entrepreneurship.

Another interesting aspect revealed by the qualitative study was lower family expectations regarding women's financial and career success, which made it easier for women to switch from other careers to digital entrepreneurship. In the patriarchal Sri Lankan society, "men are perceived as breadwinners," and women are generally not seen as financial providers (Wickramasinghe and Jayatilaka, 2006; Vossenberg, 2013; Adikaram and Razik, 2023). Thus, women tend to have more liberty when switching from a stable income source to a digital entrepreneurial career, even though it involves risks, volatility, and a lack of stability in revenue generation. Sri Lanka has witnessed a range of significant breakthroughs and challenges that have substantially altered deeply ingrained social norms. Consequently, societal attitudes about women have changed considerably. But even in the present-day context, women are mostly evaluated based on conventional standards, and hence, the country is far from attaining a fully-fledged transformation of societal attitudes about women (Hewamanne, 2020). However, the study's findings substantiate that undeniable broader changes have taken place in societal attitudes towards women, and these have contributed to reinforcing FDE, albeit unevenly. Overall, the findings of the study illustrate a nuanced combination of changing societal attitudes towards women and the persistence of the traditional

'male breadwinner' model, where women are not perceived as financial providers in the Sri Lankan context, which paradoxically contributes to women's engagement in FDE.

8.3.1.1.3 Lack of Occupational Prestige for Digital Entrepreneurship

Another important finding from the qualitative study was how social perceptions toward DE influence women's participation in DE. Findings show how societal perceptions of DE as a low-status career becomes a restraint for FDE. Respondents emphasised that in the Sri Lankan context, society perceives entrepreneurship as an option for individuals who are unable to accomplish their educational targets. Perception of entrepreneurship as a low-status career in Sri Lankan society has been substantiated by previous scholars as well. They revealed that individuals who become doctors, engineers, and lecturers based on their academic achievements are often highly regarded by the society, but entrepreneurs are viewed individuals without academic accomplishments who are compelled to settle for entrepreneurial ventures (Lin *et al.*, 2013; Thiranagama, 2016).

The lack of social recognition for entrepreneurship as a viable career is further exacerbated due to the invisible nature of digital businesses. In most situations, digital entrepreneurial ventures are home-based, and there is a lack of physical evidence about these businesses (Mason, Carter and Tagg, 2011; Wang and Keane, 2020). As digital entrepreneurship has a low recognition and invisibility in the larger society, women in DE may often be overlooked by society, and in the worst-case scenarios, these women may become victims of social criticism that they are doing some sort of surreptitious dealings. Previous scholars have found that in the local context, the surveillance system for women is too rigid (Surangi, 2018; Hewamanne, 2020); thus, they tend to be a little hesitant to engage in economic activities that are socially undervalued. Furthermore, the older generations' cognitive gap on what DE is tends to be a significant refraining factor that deters FDE. Unlike in the Western context, in the Sri Lankan culture, children are not supposed to move out of their parents' homes even after they turn 18 years old, and they are not supposed to live separately unless they are married (Lin *et al.*, 2013; Jayaratne, 2021). In general, children tend to live a more nested life with their families, and their higher education is funded either mostly, fully or partly by their parents. Thus, parental influence is substantial towards young adults' educational

and career paths in the Sri Lankan context (Lin *et al.*, 2013; Kodagoda and Samaratunge, 2023), and this is particularly pronounced for girls who grow up under patriarchal gender norms (Liyanage and Rathnayaka, 2022). As a result, when parents refuse to support or discourage their daughters from engaging in DE as they perceive it as a less dignified career, it is difficult for these girls to pursue DE. As Malach-Pines et al. (2005) explained, the positive cultural identification attached to entrepreneurship plays an influential role in aspiring an individual to identify themselves with a particular career willingly. Overall, this study reveals that digital entrepreneurship is perceived as a less dignified career in Sri Lankan society, primarily due to a lack of awareness of FDE and its limited visibility. Thus, the present study advances existing knowledge by explaining how cultural nuances influence women's intention to engage in FDE in the Sri Lankan context.

8.3.1.1.4 Formal Institutional Support

Contrary to the extant literature, this study rejects the hypothesised relationship between formal institutional support and women's participation in DE. This finding indicates that existing policy initiatives do not provide sufficient reinforcement for FDE. These results, however, align with the previous studies that revealed the unfavourable influence of weak governmental policies and structures over women in entrepreneurship (Jamali, 2009; Sandberg, 2003; Sadi and Al-Ghazali, 2010; Vossenberg, 2013; Panda and Dash, 2014; Kazumi and Kawai, 2017). Furthermore, Orser, Riding, and Li (2019) emphasised that governments should develop initiatives to address the specific concerns of women's online businesses because general state sector initiatives to uplift DE are insufficient to capture the specific experiences related to FDE. Apart from political instabilities and state sector underperformance are unavoidable in South Asian countries, there are many other complexities including regulations and business registrations, bureaucratic structures, favouritism, bribery and corruption, volatilities in inflation, fluctuations in tax rates, and unsupportive government policies that restrain any form of entrepreneurship (Panda and Dash, 2014). Therefore, it is evident that the prevailing formal institutional conditions have a lesser impact on entrepreneurship, and the consequences are more detrimental for women who have been already marginalised.

Especially when it comes to DE, the respondents emphasised their bad experiences due to incompetent state sector officials, inefficiencies of the system, and prejudicial practices. Many respondents emphasised the lack of cooperation from the state sector officials related to business registrations, attaining finance, and running the businesses. Notably, they commented on the lack of knowledge about DE among these state sector employees. This finding aligns with the study done by Adikaram and Razik (2023), which postulates that the registration of businesses and operations was affected by inefficiencies of the officials and bureaucratic red tape. In addition to this, favouritism and nepotism are pervasive challenges in South Asian governments, and these practices are known to have adverse impacts on FDE. The respondents particularly emphasised that most of the programmes currently implemented by the state sector organisations are aimed at favouring their contacts, and primarily, the same set of people receive the benefits of these programmes. This aligns with the findings of the previous studies which revealed that opportunities for female entrepreneurs are often curtailed due to favouritism in the state sector (Panda, 2018; Manello *et al.,* 2020).

Poor government support in refining the education system to foster DE is another area that showcases the state sector's inadequacy. Criticising the loopholes in the education system, respondents emphasised that formal education is failing to provide sufficient education and training on digital technology and entrepreneurship. Even the individuals with IT-related degrees mentioned gaps in their degree curricula, and they emphasised the need to map the curricula with the current market trends. Even though entrepreneurship and digital technologies were incorporated into formal school education, these were mainly limited to the conceptual aspects, with limited emphasis on practical implementation (Balasundaram, 2010; Sachitra and Chinthaka, 2022). Another critical aspect that the respondents have pointed out is the lack of emphasis on career guidance and professional development. International Labour Organization (2016) has also emphasised that despite the high standard literacy rates, functional literacy rates among Sri Lankan students are low, which needs to be bridged through career guidance to make them more career ready. Furthermore, it was emphasised that curricula mainly focus on the rote memorisation and regurgitation of information, where students are evaluated purely based on their ability to recall facts. In fact, limited academic attention is given to inculcating creative or innovative thinking. Thus, all respondents unequivocally expressed their concerns about the poor education system and

emphasised the importance of updating it. In contrast to earlier findings, this study has been unable to demonstrate a positive relationship between formal institutional support and women's intention to engage in FDE, highlighting the nuanced realities about public sector inefficiencies and bureaucratic delays in the South Asian context.

8.3.1.2 Individual Influences

According to the IDTGIT, as a broader construct, individual influences cover significant people, significant life experiences, and personal characteristics (Trauth and Connolly, 2021). In this study, the most prominent variables that come under each of these aspects were explored vis-a-vis the Sri Lankan context. Based on the integrated findings, online role models, familial male allies, and virtual networking groups were identified as the significant people reinforcing FDE. Under the significant life experiences, the impact of previous work experiences was explored, and the results showed that both negative and positive work experiences positively influence women's DE journeys. Three types of personal characteristics, namely internal motivation, digital self-efficacy (DSE), and fear of failure, were also investigated through the study. The study's integrated findings substantiated that a complex combination of internal motives inspires women to continue online businesses. DSE has also been recognised as a key driving force that reinforces FDE. Findings derived from the study reveal that the positive influence of DSE on women's intention to engage in DE was not affected by the fear of failure as expected. The influence of these factors and how these individual factors influence women's desire to engage in digital entrepreneurship are explained below.

The study's key findings on individual influences highlight several important dynamics shaping female digital entrepreneurship. Notably, familial male allies such as fathers, husbands, and brothers play a predominant role in encouraging women's entrepreneurial pursuits, serving as a significant source of social capital. However, this support also underscores the continuing influence and control male family members hold over women's decisions in patriarchal societies. Another striking finding is the presence of the "queen bee syndrome," where some successful entrepreneurial women are reluctant to act as role models for others due to feelings of threat or jealousy. This challenges previous studies that attributed the lack of female role models to external

barriers such as limited opportunities or commuting difficulties. Additionally, while digital self-efficacy is recognized as a key driver for women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship, the study reveals that women classified as mild to moderate digital entrepreneurs often equate digital competency primarily with social media proficiency. Contrary to earlier research, which emphasized financial necessity as the main motivation for women in South Asia to pursue entrepreneurship, these findings indicate that women are motivated by a complex blend of non-monetary factors, including innovation, pursuing a passion, realizing a dream, serving society, and achieving work-life balance. Finally, the study finds that fear of failure does not act as a significant barrier to digital entrepreneurial aspirations among Sri Lankan women. This contrasts with previous literature and suggests that the relationship between fear of failure and women's entrepreneurial intentions is culturally nuanced. The resilience developed from facing everyday uncertainty, along with not being viewed as primary breadwinners, means that Sri Lankan women often perceive lower levels of risk, making fear of failure a less prominent deterrent in the context of digital entrepreneurship.

8.3.1.2.1 Role Models and Mentors

The researcher was unable to test the expected relationship between role models and female participation in digital entrepreneurship using the quantitative study (explained in Chapter 5). However, the interviews provided more profound insights into the impact of role models on FDE. It has been revealed that with the proliferation of digital platforms, women have been privileged with access to role models and mentors, which has fueled them to pursue digital entrepreneurial roles. In particular, they emphasised the immense role played by the inspiring online businesswomen they met through social networking groups who positively influenced their entrepreneurial aspirations. The study's findings specifically support prior studies that emphasised opportunities women entrepreneurs receive to become role models due to the proliferation of digital platforms (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019, 2020; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023). Previous studies have highlighted the positive impact of role models on women's engagement in male-dominated sectors (Greene and Stitt-Gohdes, 1997; Kamberidou, 2020). This is immensely important in the Sri Lankan context, where cultural conditions subjugate women's involvement in digital entrepreneurship. Overall, participants identified that the role models and mentors they met

through digital platforms, and their fathers who had business backgrounds, made them confident about new venture creation.

Although the proliferation of digital technologies marked a positive change, enabling women to connect with role models, the findings revealed that the lack of role models remains a restraining factor for FDE. This finding echoes the results of prior investigations where the lack of role models has been recognised as a restraining factor for women's engagement in entrepreneurship in general (Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Panda, 2018) and digital entrepreneurship in particular (Suseno and Abbott, 2021). The most surprising factor mentioned as a reason for the lack of role models is that respondents perceived some women as reluctant to act as role models for other women because they feel threatened and jealous. This finding is controversial to the outcomes of previous studies, which primarily attributed the lack of female role models to external factors such as lack of opportunities and commuting-related barriers (Panda, 2018; Soluk, Kammerlander and Darwin, 2021). This noteworthy finding can be explained by the "Queen Bee Syndrome", which emphasises that women who reach higher positions on the corporate ladder work towards alienating and preventing other women from attaining career progression (Staines, Travis, and Jayaratne, 1974, cited in Johnson and Mathur-Helm, 2011). As elaborated in the previous literature, queen bees exist in male-dominant sectors, where women have very limited opportunities (Johnson and Mathur-Helm, 2011; Grangeiro and Neto, 2023). This can be used to explain the prevailing situation in FDE, which is a male-dominated sector with less legitimisation for women. Limited opportunities and the challenging pathways that successful female digital entrepreneurs navigated may have made them overly protective of their current state, and they may think that others should also follow the same difficult path they did. This highlights the importance of socially endorsing those female entrepreneurs who actively mentor others. Such initiatives will help to establish the practice of mentoring as a valued social norm, which in turn will encourage more female entrepreneurs to act as role models for others.

8.3.1.2.1 Members of Social Networking Groups

The findings from the qualitative study highlight that networking opportunities on digital platforms have helped female entrepreneurs connect with other women, positively impacting their intention to launch digital businesses. Especially women who did not have networking

opportunities in the brick-and-mortar world have been able to connect with many other women through social networking sites, which encouraged their participation in DE. Many respondents appreciated the great emotional support they received from Facebook support groups, and referred to these groups as their "go-to place" when they needed someone to talk to, share their fears, or when they needed someone to listen to them. Apart from such psychological empowerment, these online support groups have also helped many respondents to promote their business activities and connect with potential customers. For example, most women who sell goods to female customers through digital platforms claimed that such networking opportunities enabled them to promote their products to potential customers. These findings align with a study by Chakraborty and Biswal (2023), which highlights that social media engagement among women positively influences their intentions to start digital businesses and psychologically empowers them. Furthermore, De Silva and Hansson (2024) also substantiated that Facebook groups enable women to emotionally connect with other women, promote their businesses, and acquire new knowledge and insights.

Drawing support from online role models, and networking with other women for emotional support, knowledge sharing, and promoting products are identified in digital affordances theories as well (Autio *et al.,* 2018). Virtual networking affordances of digital technologies align with the findings of previous studies that explored how digital platforms resulted in blurring geographical boundaries which enable women to connect with others for socialising, networking, and providing and getting support (Nambisan, Wright and Feldman, 2019; McAdam, Crawley and Harrison, 2020; Meurer *et al.*, 2022; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023). This phenomenon suggests how women can connect with significant individuals and how these individuals act as catalysts for change in women's pursuit of DE. This finding provides context-specific understanding that, although formal education does not have a positive influence on women's engagement in FDE in the Sri Lankan context, women need to be well versed in social media and its core features, not only to foster peer support but to attain visibility in FDE. This also underscores the need for policy interventions that focus on enhancing the digital literacy of female entrepreneurs. In fact, given its critical role, digital literacy should be considered a key economic indicator.

8.3.1.2.1 Family Support and Familial Male Allies

The findings of the study show that family support has a positive influence on FDE. This finding aligns with the previous studies that discovered the positive role played by family support towards uplifting women's entrepreneurial aspirations (Ranasinghe, 2008; Brush and Cooper, 2012; Powell and Eddleston, 2013; Mari, Poggesi and De Vita, 2016; Kazumi and Kawai, 2017; Sundermeier, Wessel and Davidson, 2018; Kamberidou, 2020; Shukla *et al.*, 2021; Kodagoda and Samaratunge, 2023). Researchers have emphasised that in societies where gender discrimination and unfavourable institutional voids are prevalent, family support is crucial in helping female entrepreneurs overcome the barriers that may arise from a lack of systemic support (Ahlstrom and Li, 2010; Mazonde, 2016). In the Sri Lankan context, female entrepreneurs rely heavily on their families for financial and non-financial support. Most respondents shared their experiences and said they relied on their families to accrue the capital for the business, get technological support to run the businesses, and balance household chores. Particularly, women with children said that they heavily relied on support from their parents for childcare due to the absence of reliable childcare facilities in the country. It was also interesting to learn that these women relied heavily on their husbands' support to run the digital aspects of the businesses. While this explicitly showcases the family support extended to women, it covertly means the presence of male dominance and male connotation ascribed to digital technologies.

Noteworthy results from the interviews included the predominant role that familial male allies played in encouraging women to pursue their entrepreneurial careers. Most respondents mentioned that the support received from fathers, husbands, and brothers is an excellent source of social capital. In patriarchal societies where men hold the head of the family role, men's permission, blessings, and support are critical for a woman to start and continue a business (Atarah and Nolan, 2023). As entrepreneurship and information technology careers are recognised as male-dominated domains, men, as the dominant players, have to play a proactive role in attaining gender parity in DE. The gendered barriers or the marginalisation experienced by women are mainly due to the inequitable distribution of power. Therefore, without the support from the powerful segment, the powerless will not be able to challenge the status quo or transform the system that positions

them in oppression. Therefore, it can be concluded that the support from male family members plays a pivotal role in uplifting FDE. Thus, the findings of this research further align with the study conducted by Trauth and Connolly (2021), which revealed the supportive role played by fathers, brothers, and husbands for women to attain social legitimisation that sanctions their engagement in male-dominant careers. It is evident that due to the family embeddedness of female entrepreneurship (Harrison, Leitch, and McAdam, 2020), encouragement received from the family, especially the male family members, plays a pivotal role in women's engagement in male-dominant digital entrepreneurship. While the positive influence of family support on women's engagement in FDE is consistent with previous literature, this study advances understanding by illustrating culturally embedded insights. The findings highlight the predominant role played by male family members in encouraging women to step into male-dominant arenas, such as digital entrepreneurship. Normalising male advocacy for women's participation and success in traditionally male-dominated fields should begin early, ideally during school education. For example, during parent-teacher meetings and classroom instruction, teachers could raise awareness by highlighting the support that can be provided by fathers, husbands, male siblings, friends, and colleagues in empowering women to transcend traditional gender roles.

8.3.1.2.1 Previous Work Experience

Though the impact of previous work experience is a significant factor, the findings of the quantitative study could not substantiate the expected positive relationship between previous work experience and women's engagement in DE. This was mainly due to the limitation of the questionnaire design (explained in Chapter 5). However, the qualitative study further explored the impact of work experience. Regarding the impact of their previous work experience on their engagement in digital entrepreneurship, respondents had a range of perspectives. Interestingly, while positive work experiences contribute to accruing human capital and financial capital for FDE, negative experiences at previous workplaces could deter women from pursuing corporate jobs and steer them towards DE. The findings further revealed that women could bridge the gaps in digital literacy, business knowledge, and networking, owing to the experiences they gained in their previous jobs. This result corresponds with earlier studies that substantiated the immense role played by the experience attained from previous employment in initiating entrepreneurial

businesses (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Jayawarna, Rouse and Kitching, 2013; Kautonen et al., 2023). Particularly, Braguinsky, Klepper, and Ohyama (2012) substantiated that the founder's previous work experience plays an immense role in high-tech venture start-ups. Brush *et al.*, (2017) emphasises that previous employment experiences have also equipped women to overcome the limitations they experienced in pursuing their entrepreneurial ideas.

Especially since the study was conducted right after the COVID-19 pandemic, many respondents emphasised how the pandemic-induced layoffs and pay cuts affected their jobs and encouraged them to pursue digital businesses. Respondents explained that during the pandemic, they became more enlightened about the career uncertainty and instability of working for someone. Hence, they focused on digital entrepreneurship as a viable means of generating income through self-employment. In addition, it was revealed that discriminatory practices and workplace harassment experienced by these women had made them frustrated about their employment, and as a result, they started to look for alternatives. In fact, sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace are prominent factors affecting women's premature opting out of the corporate sector (Asian Development Bank, 2018). Thus, it can be seen that unpleasant experiences in the workplace may also drive women to engage in digital businesses as they perceive them as a safe space that requires limited physical and face-to-face interactions. Consistent with the literature, this research confirmed a positive relationship between previous work experience and women's intention to engage in FDE. Furthermore, the study advances understanding by demonstrating how negative previous work experiences can serve as catalysts for women's engagement in digital entrepreneurial ventures. Capitalising on this, the state and private sectors could launch campaigns that encourage women to start their own businesses, leveraging their work experience and knowledge. For instance, Vocational Training Authority and other related government institutes in Sri Lanka could appoint agents to help women engage in dialogue about how they can leverage their experiences to launch their own business ventures. In addition to establishing such units, it is crucial to raise public awareness about their presence through both traditional and digital media, to ensure that women can access the support offered.

8.3.1.2.1 Digital Self-Efficacy

As hypothesised, the quantitative study confirmed a positive relationship between Digital Self-Efficacy (DSE) and women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship. The findings of this study align with the previous studies that substantiated how high DSE positively influences one's desire to navigate the complexities of digital businesses (Ashraf, Alam and Alexa, 2021; Xin and Ma, 2023; Bui and Duong, 2024). Especially when it comes to FDE, DSE can be recognised as a critical factor that encourages women, as it can serve as a rebuttal for the negativity generated by external factors. As Nordén, Mannila, and Pears (2017) emphasised, even when a person lacks competencies, they can still do that task successfully if their self-efficacy levels are high. Thus, in the given context, even though women's digital competencies are low compared to their male counterparts, their high levels of DSE will be a positive factor that drives them to pursue digital entrepreneurship.

Insights from the interviews help to deepen the understanding of the impact of digital self-efficacy. Respondents believe they are competent enough to run a business in digital spaces and demonstrate a strong desire to stay up to date with the latest technological developments. However, when focusing on how things are happening at the grassroots level, concerns arise about the DSE of entrepreneurs who sell products and services through digital platforms. Based on the findings of the interviews, it became evident that digital competencies and confidence among high-tech digital entrepreneurs remain high, as they often come from IT educational backgrounds and/or possess very high English language competencies, which makes it easier for them to learn new technologies. However, when it comes to the DSE of women who belong to the category of mild to moderate digital entrepreneurs (Hull *et al.*, 2007), it is observed that they tend to equate digital competencies primarily with social media proficiency. For more complex technical tasks such as content creation or digital marketing, they mostly rely on their husbands/male partners. Covertly, this emphasises the reinforcing of patriarchy and male dominance in digital entrepreneurship. Moreover, this phenomenon highlights the importance of increasing individuals' awareness of the broader scope of digital technology, which extends beyond social media. In conclusion, this finding supports the previous literature on self-efficacy and entrepreneurial intention. The proven relationship between DSE and FDE highlights the significant impact of a woman's technological

competencies and digital literacy on her engagement in digital entrepreneurship. One of the interesting aspects highlighted by the findings is the need to strengthen competencies among mild and moderate digital entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka. By doing so, women entrepreneurs will be able to fully leverage digital resources and avoid depending on male family members, which covertly reinforces gender norms in digital spaces. To facilitate this, government institutions like the Vocational Training Authority could provide tailored digital skills training or create platforms for peer learning groups. However, when designing these programmes, it is vital to make sure that they are customised to suit the specific requirements and knowledge levels of female digital entrepreneurs because generic courses may not address their specific needs. Further, measures should be taken to provide access to affordable digital devices in order to help these women to bridge the digital divide.

8.3.1.2.1 Internal Motivations

Proving that inner motives are central to the entrepreneurial process (Baumol, 1968), and in the present study, the relationship between internal motives and intention to engage in DE was positive. As the extant literature attests, internal motivation is a multifaceted construct consisting of various interconnected motives; rather than taking individual motivational factors separately, taking the whole together and exploring would be more viable (Kirkwood, 2009; Adikaram and Razik, 2023). Thus, in this study, internal motivations were a higher-order construct representing a combination of energetic forces, namely the desire for self-realisation, recognition, innovation, independence, and financial success, creating a psychological drive for FDE. The findings aligned with the previous studies of Edelman *et al.* (2010) and Birley and Westhead (1994), which substantiate the combination of internal motives— desire for self-realisation, recognition, innovation, independence, and financial success— influence an individual's intention to engage in entrepreneurship.

At the interviews, efforts were made to further understand the internal motivations that drive women to pursue digital entrepreneurship. The qualitative study also indicated that female digital entrepreneurs were motivated by a complex blend of motivational factors. During the interviews, respondents particularly emphasised that while they appreciate the financial gains

attained from digital entrepreneurship, their entrepreneurial pursuits were mostly driven by non-monetary factors such as the desire for innovation, capitalising on a hobby, realising a dream, serving society, and achieving work-life balance. Even those individuals who started off businesses due to pandemic-induced job losses did not recognise money as the key factor that drove them to engage in digital entrepreneurship. This finding can be considered somewhat controversial to the findings of prior studies in developing contexts, which attest that economic factors are more prominent among the respondents to become female entrepreneurs (Ummahand Gunapalan, 2013; Franzke et al., 2022). This can also be attributed to the deep-rooted gender norms in the patriarchal society, where families expect less from women when it comes to sharing the financial responsibilities of the family (Adikaram and Razik, 2023). Respondents recognised their desire for work-life balance as one of the key motives that drove them to engage in digital entrepreneurship. This finding supports the previous literature that substantiates that women tend to engage in entrepreneurship as they perceive it as a flexible means of attaining work-life balance (Kirkwood, 2009; Donnelly *et al.*, 2016; Mari, Poggesi and De Vita, 2016; Adikaram and Razik, 2023). Due to the deep-rooted gender norms, women are naturally inclined to believe that they are primarily responsible for household chores and the well-being of their children, and these commitments play a central role in shaping women's career choices. Women tend to perceive digital entrepreneurship more favourably as it reduces the need for daily commuting and staying away from home, which may be why they opt for digital entrepreneurship (Best, Lassalle, and Nicolopoulou, 2025). They also emphasised the desire to capitalise on a hobby as part of their digital entrepreneurial drive. This finding aligns with the previous studies that substantiate women started digital entrepreneurship to capitalise on their hobby (Suseno and Abbott, 2021; Alhothali and Al-Dajani, 2022). This reflects the gendered marginalisation experienced by women. Their ventures are driven more by their hobbies than by market opportunities, largely due to a lack of awareness and training regarding entrepreneurial opportunities. Furthermore, some respondents reported that their strong desire to serve society was a key motivator for engaging in digital entrepreneurship. This motive can be attributed to empathy, caring, and altruism, which are feminine traits inherent in women (Hechavarria and Ingram, 2016). In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that an array of motivational factors are working in tandem to determine FDE intentions, and these motives are often profoundly influenced by women's gender identity. While consistent with existing literature, these findings offer further insight into how the cultural nuances

within specific socio-cultural contexts shape the internal motivations that drive women to pursue digital entrepreneurship. In this context, it is essential to guide female digital entrepreneurs in choosing business ventures with high profit margins that align with their personal identity, as businesses selected solely based on personal interests often tend to yield low profits. Additionally, the government, as well as non-governmental/ private sector organisations should recognise and celebrate the high social impact created by women in digital enterprises, which will serve to motivate more women to pursue digital entrepreneurship.

8.3.1.2.1 Moderating Effect of Fear of Failure

Although it was hypothesised that fear of failure moderates the positive relationship between DSE and FDE in Sri Lanka, findings of the present study did not provide sufficient evidence to support this relationship. By integrating the quantitative findings with the insights received from the interviews, several possible reasons for rejecting the hypothesised moderator effect of fear of failure on the relationship between DSE and entrepreneurial intention can be identified. In the interviews, respondents revealed their increased risk-taking propensity. One of their biggest pieces of advice for other women is “not to be afraid to take a risk, " reflecting their positive psychological state amidst uncertainties and difficult conditions. As a result of constant exposure to various uncertainties related to their personal and social spheres of life (Panda, 2018), South Asian Women tend to develop resilience and adaptability over time, which enables them to face ambiguities and risks in a more effective manner. Kong, Zhao, and Tsai (2020) emphasised that entrepreneurial individuals with high psychological capital will not retract easily due to their fears about being unable to achieve their goals. Therefore, one possible reason for rejecting the hypothesis can be explained by the resilience of Sri Lankan women. This resilient spirit makes them more psychologically prepared to embrace the inevitable uncertainties in any form of entrepreneurship instead of being paralysed by fears. Another possible explanation for women not being affected by the fear of failure is the deep-rooted gender norms in the Sri Lankan context, which does not expect women to be financial providers in families (Adikaram and Razik, 2023). As their families have fewer expectations of them regarding their financial and career accomplishments, they may tend to experience less pressure and psychological tension when entering a volatile field like digital entrepreneurship. In summary, it is evident that in the Sri

Lankan context, fear of failure cannot be identified as a critical restraining factor that deters female digital entrepreneurial aspirations. While this finding contradicts previous studies, it demonstrates a nuanced aspect that the relationship between fear of failure and women's intention to engage in FDE is culturally dependent. Given the constant presence of uncertainty as an inherent part of their everyday experiences, South Asian women often develop strong resilience in the face of risk. Additionally, women perceive lower levels of risk when it comes to changing jobs, as they are not typically perceived as breadwinners, making the fear of failure a less prominent barrier to engaging in digital entrepreneurship.

8.3.1.3 Individual Identity

Under the broader construct of individual identity, efforts were taken to explore how personal demographics affect women's participation in digital entrepreneurship. The impact of marital status, socio-economic status (SES), educational attainment, and geographical location on FDE was explored. The integrated findings show that married women are more inclined to participate in digital businesses. The relationship between SES and women's participation in DE was not proven in this study. But one of the striking findings related to SES that emerged from the qualitative study was the recognition of DE as a liberation pathway for the unique set of challenges experienced by high-class women. Furthermore, the findings reflect where the women live, and their educational attainments are immaterial to their engagement in DE. Another finding that emerged from the qualitative study is that women belonging to ethnic minorities can also navigate the barriers they experience in the physical world through their engagement in DE. In addition to the direct impact of these factors on FDE, efforts were taken to explore how critical demographic factors, namely geographical location and marital status, influence the relationship between internal motives and women's participation in DE. The findings suggest that living in urban areas as well as being married strengthen the relationship between internal motives and women's participation in digital entrepreneurship.

Exploring the impact of demographics paves the way to transcend the perception of women as a monolithic segment, enabling the exploration of how intersectional differences influence these women's navigation in digital entrepreneurship. These findings address the call for exploring how

intersectionality influences the experiences of women engaged in developing digital ventures (Dy, Marlow, and Martin, 2017b; McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison, 2019; Alhajri and Aloud, 2023). Findings substantiate that women will be able to ameliorate the exacerbated inequalities they experience as their gender intersects with other social ascriptions through the digital affordances offered in the online context. Thus, it is evident that exacerbated inequalities experienced by women belonging to multiple groups drive those women to disrupt the status quo and participate in FDE. Overall, it can be concluded that intersectional identities drive women to pursue digital entrepreneurship.

8.3.1.3.1 Marital Status

Based on the quantitative study, married women are more inclined to engage in digital entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context. This finding aligns with the previous studies that highlighted married women are more likely to become self-employed as they believe it will enable them to strike a balance between work-family commitments (Simoes, Crespo and Moreira, 2016; Ajefu, 2019). In addition, several studies substantiated that marriage encourages women more than men to transition from full-time employment to entrepreneurial ventures (Carr, 1996; Choi and Kim, 2021; Patrick, Stephens and Weinstein, 2024). However, a study conducted by Caputo and Dolinsky (1998) refutes the relationship between marital status and women's choices. In the context of DE, however, the flexibility affordances may have augmented the desire of married women to engage in DE.

The interviews also offered further insights into how marriage positively influences FDE in the Sri Lankan context. According to the respondents, marriage and children are considered the ultimate goals in women's lives, and they prioritise fulfilling the roles of a "dutiful wife" and a "good mother". Respondents revealed that after marriage, they wanted to prioritise their household activities and children, which made it difficult to pursue a career outside the home that requires strict time commitment, commuting, and socialising. As corporate jobs become increasingly challenging, many professionals opt for entrepreneurial roles, drawn to the perceived flexibility offered by such ventures. In the South Asian context, women perceive marriage as the culmination of womanhood. Women, as wives and mothers, are expected to provide physical and emotional

support for their husbands who return home exhausted after work, take great care of children, prepare meals, and attend to other household activities (Kodagoda, 2010; Mishra, 2013; Surangi, 2018). As married women shoulder disproportionate household responsibilities, they believe DE is a viable income-generating activity as it offers greater flexibility.

Furthermore, respondents explained that as families grow, increasing financial pressure encourages women to engage in dual-income earning. As a result, women who have not worked earlier also start thinking about engaging in economic activities, which leads them to pursue digital businesses. This aligns with the findings of Dawson *et al.* (2014), which emphasises that financial pressure arising from having children becomes an additional motivation for women to pursue self-employment. This study significantly contributes to the understanding of the positive relationship between marriage and digital entrepreneurial intention among women by illustrating how women's engagement in FDE should not be perceived merely as an independent career choice, but rather as a negotiated response to structural and familial demands.

8.3.1.3.2 Socioeconomic Status

Converse to the hypotheses, the study found that the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and women's intention to engage in DE was insignificant. While no previous studies explored the impact of SES on female digital entrepreneurial intention, studies have been conducted on the influence of SES on entrepreneurial intention in general and women's entrepreneurial engagement in particular. These studies were conducted in the offline context, where findings substantiated that an individual's SES positively influences their entrepreneurial aspirations (Dunn and Holtz-Eakin, 2000; Hsu, Roberts and Eesley, 2007; Schoon and Duckworth, 2012; Lara-Bocanegra *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, a study conducted by Wang and Liu (2024) also substantiated that women from upper-class families have access to more financial and social capital, which boosts their drive to become entrepreneurs. However, the findings of this study, which explored the impact of SES on women's participation in digital ventures, contradict these previous studies. This may suggest that SES, which strongly influences women's career choices offline, may not have the same effects in the digital context.

The interviews provided further insights, and respondents revealed that their economic status did not influence their entrepreneurial aspirations. Most of them shared their experiences about starting a business with minimal financial capital, which they did not perceive as an option in the brick-and-mortar world. One unanticipated result was that women from upper-class families explained how their family status worked as a barrier to engaging in corporate jobs and how they managed to navigate this barrier through FDE. These upper-class women have been restricted by their family's expectations that they will play more "ladylike" roles primarily associated with grace, modesty, a focus on domestic roles, and being symbolic heads in their family businesses. Consequently, their economic engagement is mainly perceived as unnecessary or sometimes as a disgrace to their upper-class family status. A study by Lapour and Heppner (2009) emphasised how elite-class adolescent women's career aspirations are heavily influenced by their parents and how they were discouraged from taking up certain jobs as those were perceived as undesirable due to their family status. Overall, it is evident that socioeconomic status does not significantly influence women's digital entrepreneurial intentions. However, for upper-class women whose career aspirations are discouraged by their families, DE presents an acceptable alternative. This, however, needs to be explored further with a larger sample.

8.3.1.3.3 Educational Attainment

The study could not support the hypothesised positive relationship between educational attainment and women's desire to pursue a career as a digital entrepreneur. This finding contradicts previous studies that suggested education has a positive influence on women's intention to engage in entrepreneurship offline (Karimi et al., 2014; Mylonas et al., 2017). The interviews further elaborated on the insignificant relationship, revealing various nuances and aspects. Proving the entwined nature of factors, it became evident that poor educational policies and the societal perception of DE as a less dignified career (discussed under environmental factors) are the root causes of the insignificant relationship between educational attainment and women's participation in DE. One of the striking findings of the qualitative study is that the education system remains focused on conventional business models, which do not provide sufficient attention to the fast-paced digital economy. Consequently, it does not provide adequate backing to prepare individuals for real-world entrepreneurship. Notably, the gender disparity in education, which has been

highlighted in many of the previous studies on female entrepreneurship (Raghuvanshi, Agrawal, and Ghosh, 2017; Panda, 2018), did not emerge as a significant finding in the current study. Although previous literature has highlighted the lack of gender parity in education as a primary barrier to women's success in the male-dominated entrepreneurial arena (Panda, 2018), this cannot be generalised to the Sri Lankan context. Compared to the neighbouring South Asian countries, Sri Lanka has attained a high level of gender parity in education (Banu, 2016b). In Sri Lanka, women enjoy equal opportunities in education, and surprisingly, women's achievement in education is equal or sometimes higher than men's (Kailasapathy and Metz, 2012; Adikaram and Razik, 2023). For instance, based on the Sri Lanka University Statistics (2018) in the national universities, women's engagement in STEM programs was 55% in 2018, showcasing the decline of the gender gap in STEM education. This presents a puzzling paradox where women excel in education as much as men, yet they are underrepresented in the realm of digital entrepreneurship. This finding highlights that, more than the gender disparity in access to education, the central problem lies in the quality of the education received by the individuals, regardless of their gender. Highlighting the issues related to the quality of education, scholars emphasised that the conventional Sri Lankan education system has not sufficiently contributed towards encouraging and promoting entrepreneurial education (Lin *et al.*, 2013; Marambe, 2015) and little attention has been given to the new technological knowledge (Sachitra and Chinthaka, 2022). These drawbacks in the overall education system result in Sri Lankans not being able to realise the full potential of digital entrepreneurship. In this context, things can be more detrimental for women due to their secondary gender identity. Thus, it can be concluded that due to the limitations in the education system that fail to foster digital entrepreneurial mindsets, women perceive education as immaterial for FDE. Furthermore, the social perception of DE as a less dignified economic activity may have also discouraged individuals with educational accomplished to start digital businesses. As explained previously, while being a doctor, engineer, or lawyer is celebrated, running a business is considered an option available for an individual unable to achieve such accomplishments. This social perception may deter educated girls from embracing DE in the Sri Lankan context.

Moreover, respondents perceived less value in formal education when engaging in digital businesses as the learning affordances offered through digital platforms enable them to compensate for the gaps in educational attainments. With the assistance of digital platforms, female

entrepreneurs have bridged 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, which they regarded as profound opportunities. Thus, it may be perceived that the learning affordances aspect of digital affordances is one of the reasons why respondents perceive that formal education is immaterial when it comes to FDE. Learning affordances of digital technologies in constrained contexts were emphasised by previous scholars, where they emphasised how female digital entrepreneurs utilised digital platforms to learn about new product development and running online marketing campaigns (Alhothali and Al-Dajani, 2022; Wiig, Schou, and Hansen, 2023). In summary, among female digital entrepreneurs, formal educational attainment is not perceived as a significant construct that reinforces aspirations to engage in digital entrepreneurship.

8.3.1.3.4 Geographical Location

The expected relationship between geographic location and women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship was not supported by the results of the quantitative study. As digital infrastructure is more developed in urban areas, it was initially hypothesised that living in an urban area would positively influence women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship. However, the study's outcomes could not establish a statistically significant relationship between the two variables. These findings contradict the extant literature substantiating that digital ventures are mostly started in urban metropolitan areas with a favourable digital entrepreneurial ecosystem (Autio *et al.*, 2014; Cornet, Bonnet and Bourdin, 2023; Bergholz *et al.*, 2024). However, the relationship between geographical location and FDE emerged as a more complex phenomenon than anticipated when explored further through the qualitative study.

The interviews provided a deeper insight into why the anticipated association was not proven in the given context. Further, they unveiled the uneven impact of geographical location on women's intention to engage in digital businesses. It is worth noting that even though urban areas are a step ahead in digital infrastructure, this may not have reinforced FDE aspirations. A possible explanation for this is the perceived disparity in occupational prestige in Sri Lankan society. In the broader Sri Lankan society, entrepreneurship is still perceived as a low-status career compared to corporate jobs (Madawala, Foroudi, and Palazzo, 2023). As urban women have wider access to

corporate jobs that are socially recognised, they may opt to work in the corporate sector rather than pursuing digital entrepreneurial careers, which have less visibility and recognition in the broader society. Furthermore, the qualitative study offered some nuanced insights about the impact of rural living on FDE. Amidst the prevalence of the urban-rural digital divide, rural living offers certain conditions that encourage women to pursue digital businesses. Respondents living in rural areas have limited job opportunities in their villages, and migrating to cities to engage in economic activities is not also an option for most of them, because in the local culture, it is believed that decent, well-mannered girls will be living more nested lives under the care of their parents or husbands (Kodagoda, 2010; Hewamanne, 2020). Due to these reasons, respondents highlighted that women living in rural areas are more inclined to engage in FDE. Despite the prevalence of issues related to the urban-rural digital divide and language divide, which restrain women's digital entrepreneurial pathways, it is evident that these issues do not dissuade rural women from engaging in FDE. This points to the need to focus on interventions specially targeted at the needs of these communities and their support and advisory groups.

8.3.1.3.5 Moderating Effect of Marital Status

As marriage is considered a significant milestone in the lives of South Asian women (marriage is often considered the second birth of a girl in popular ideologies in Sri Lanka) (Mishra, 2006), this study attempted to gain a broader understanding of how marital status moderates the relationship between women's internal motives and their intention towards engagement in DE. Thus, with the support of literature, it was hypothesised that marriage strengthens the positive relationship between internal motivations and women's intention to engage in DE. The findings derived from the quantitative study revealed that marriage strengthens the positive relationship between women's internal motives and digital entrepreneurial intention. An interesting aspect revealed based on the interviews was how marriage gave women more freedom and support to realise their digital entrepreneurial aspirations, which were previously constrained. Most unmarried women in society become victims of high levels of social surveillance, which forces them to comply with societal expectations (Hewamanne, 2020). Kamberidou (2020) also emphasised that South Asian parents are particularly vigilant about the career decisions of their young daughters, as these decisions directly impact their marriage prospects. Reputation and

honour for girls will depend on the extent to which they adhere to the deep-rooted gender norms in society. If young women appear to go against the social order, they are perceived as strong, independent, dominating, and strong-headed, and as such, are at risk of being stigmatised. Such stigmatisation, in turn, may make it difficult for them to find a suitable marriage partner (Chengadu and Scheepers 2017; Rajani and Panicker 2017). In such a background, challenges are exacerbated for an unmarried girl to pursue FDE, which has low social recognition compared to corporate jobs. In the interviews, respondents emphasised that, although they had dreamed of becoming digital entrepreneurs, they waited until marriage to avoid potential complexities. In addition, respondents mentioned the tremendous support they received from their husbands in terms of financial capital, technological know-how, and emotional support, which boosted their confidence and inner drive to take risks and go ahead with their digital entrepreneurial endeavors. In essence, marriage strengthens the positive relationship between women's internal motivation and intention to engage in DE. This further highlights how the digital entrepreneurial landscape works as a roadmap for the liberation of married women, whose pathways are constrained due to their new role as "wives" and "mothers".

8.3.1.4 Moderating Effect of Geographic Location

The rural-urban digital divide has been a focal aspect influencing the intensity of DE (Gerli and Whalley, 2022) to attain a holistic understanding of the impact of geographic location. In addition to the direct influence of geographical location on women's engagement in DE, the moderating effect of geographic location on the women's intention to engage in DE was also explored. Even though the direct relationship between urban living and the intention to engage in DE was not proven, it was substantiated that living in an urban area strengthens the relationship between an individual's inner motives and their intention to engage in DE. This complexity can be explained by paying attention to the particular contextual conditions. Based on the study's findings, even though living in an urban area does not positively influence women to pursue DE, if the individual already has internal motives that drive her to engage in FDE, it will be further strengthened through urban living. One possible explanation may be the rural-urban digital divide, which resulted in positioning urban women in an advantaged position with better access to digital infrastructure and skills (Novo-Corti, Varela-Candamio and García-Álvarez, 2014; Gerli and

Whalley, 2022). Another reason may be that, compared to the rural areas in urban areas, constrictive practices imposed on women are less stringent, giving them more freedom to make their career choices and lifestyle.

In conclusion, the integrated findings substantiate that urban living moderates the relationship between inner motives and women's intention to engage in DE. This study enhances our understanding by providing a nuanced perspective on the geographical influence on female entrepreneurial intention. While a direct relationship demonstrates that living in rural areas is positively associated with entrepreneurial intention, the moderation analysis uncovers that urban living strengthens the relationship between internal motivations and female digital entrepreneurial intention, highlighting the context-specific role of geography in shaping how personal drivers translate into entrepreneurial action.

8.3.1.4.1 Ethnicity

Adding to the personal demographics identified in the quantitative study, the qualitative study recognised ethnicity as another essential demographic aspect that impacts women's intention to engage in digital entrepreneurship. Findings from the interviews revealed how FDE functioned as a liberating pathway for women experiencing double marginalisation because of being a woman and belonging to an ethnic minority. For example, Muslim respondents who joined the interviews explained that they were restrained by stricter constraints derived from religious practices. These restrictions often confine the ways in which women engage in income-generating economic activities that require commuting, interactions, and networking with men. Respondents representing the Tamil community also emphasised that the stereotypes and biases around both gender and ethnicity result in compounded discrimination, affecting their means of engaging in economic activities. Adikaram and Razik (2023) explored the challenges for Sri Lankan STEM women entrepreneurs. Similar to the findings of the present study, their findings also showed that gendered ideologies that constrain the pathways for female entrepreneurs are more pronounced among the Tamil and Muslim ethnic minorities in the country. However, while highlighting the exacerbated challenges, interviewees also explained how they navigated these barriers using digital affordances. Yet, it is evident that when intertwined with ethnicity and caste, gender has a

strong impact on women's career choices (Otobe, 2013). These findings align with a study conducted by Anwar and Daniel (2016), which substantiates that digital affordances offered by online businesses enable women from ethnic minorities to navigate the augmented barriers they experience in the brick-and-mortar world. Furthermore, the findings support previous studies that found digital entrepreneurship provides an empowering pathway for Muslim women who experience strict gender segregation (McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison, 2019; 2020). However, the findings form a contrast to some of the previous studies which argue that FDE perpetuates or exacerbates the existing marginalisation experienced by ethnic minorities (Dy, Marlow, & Martin, 2017; Dy, Martin, & Marlow, 2018).

Overall, the findings of the present study support the idea that FDE enables women to transcend the disadvantaged positionality experienced by them as a result of the intersection of gender and ethnicity. However, as the number of respondents representing ethnic minority groups is limited in the present study, it is recommended that further studies be conducted on the area by taking a more sizable sample to gain a holistic picture.

8.3.2 Female Digital Entrepreneurs as Active Change Agents

8.3.2.1 Potential of Female Digital Entrepreneurs to Bring About Positive Social Change

Emancipation focuses on attaining a higher-order outcome that reflects broader changes in social order that go beyond the improved state of the individual (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018; Trivedi and Petkova, 2022). Thus, after investigating the factors driving women to disrupt the status quo and engage in DE, the researcher explored the broader social changes that were activated through FDE. It is impossible to attain complete gender parity in digital entrepreneurship without changing the established collective norms and creating new norms favourable for women. Through exploring the social change activated through FDE, the findings of this study unveiled a two-way interaction between FDE and the broader environment. When it comes to social change activated through FDE, the findings of this study reveal a much more complex interplay between the personal, family, and community levels. Here, it was evident that female digital entrepreneurs manipulate the monetary and social capital they accrue through DE to ensure the gradual transformation of the social tropes about their gendered identity. This finding demonstrates that

personal growth and a sense of accomplishment are key drivers of women's engagement in entrepreneurship, illustrating how individual-level transformation can serve as a catalyst for broader social change.

The findings of the qualitative study revealed micro and macro-level changes activated through women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship. At the personal level, women have been able to mark personal growth and attain a sense of accomplishment through their engagement in digital entrepreneurship. They have marked personal growth by sharpening their skills, improving their network, and gaining financial growth. Furthermore, the personal growth they have marked and the socio-economic contribution they make give them an increased sense of accomplishment. These personal-level accomplishments of female digital entrepreneurs, intertwined with their relationships with family, kinship, and the broader community, can lead to changes in the wider social order and create a better world for women. The findings showed that women, through their digital businesses, are in a position to contribute towards the country's economic development and employment opportunities. Furthermore, the improved economic state of women results in enhanced family well-being. These results have the potential to positively impact the broader society. Women's new identity as female digital entrepreneurs enables them to uplift their status and gain more recognition in different social spheres. This results in the activation of positive social change that leads to the re-articulation of deep-rooted gender norms. The qualitative study outcomes yielded another striking finding where women in digital businesses (despite the type of digital business they undertake) are growth-oriented and are increasingly focused on operating ethical and socially responsible businesses. This finding reflects how women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship disproves the widely accepted notion of the female underperformance hypothesis and ameliorates women's entrepreneurship status by overcoming the social perception of women's businesses as secondary (Du and Henrekson, 2000). Additionally, in the Sri Lankan context, women in digital businesses also activate societal-level changes by appearing as role models and inspirational leaders for other women. The findings also suggest that enhanced recognition and visibility of women in male-dominant spheres will gradually transform societal expectations about being a woman.

However, it is worthwhile to note that although FDE has greater potential to activate positive societal change in the Sri Lankan context, it has not completely eradicated the barriers experienced by women. The findings show that not only do social inequalities that prevail in the brick-and-mortar world persist in the digital world, but new challenges for women may also emerge, which make things difficult for women. It was also revealed that most female digital entrepreneurs find it challenging to strike a work-life balance and are often compelled to multi-task even though it is tiresome. Furthermore, it was found that female digital entrepreneurial businesses are concentrated in the female-dominant sectors where the competition is fierce, and profit margins are thin. Another noteworthy finding is that the male family members still handle key functions of these digital businesses (ex: digital technology, marketing campaigns, and financial management). It was also found that female digital entrepreneurs often become victims of cyberbullying. Nevertheless, positive social changes activated through FDE should be acknowledged in the given context, although some evidence of patriarchy has been reinforced.

Personal Growth and Sense of Accomplishment

The study's findings highlight that women achieved considerable personal growth through their engagement in DE. They specifically mentioned the immense growth in terms of more stable financial status, social exposure, and sharpening of skills. These results are in line with previous studies, which showcase that FDE enables women to uplift themselves in countless ways, such as enhanced economic status, increased social exposure, and updated knowledge (Yu and Cui, 2019; Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; De Silva *et al.*, 2021; Shukla *et al.*, 2021). Respondents emphasised that the financial gains they acquired through their businesses gave them a sense of security about their lives and a way to improve their quality of life. Women also emphasised that improved financial status gave them more autonomy over making decisions. Furthermore, the women emphasised how much they appreciated the social exposure they received through their engagement in DE. For instance, some respondents emphasised that they could change the confined lifestyle they experienced owing to their digital businesses, where they could find new friends, communicate with different people, and participate in online networking events. Especially young mothers who were homebound with their kids found their online businesses to be a means of adult socialisation. This supports the findings of Kelly and McAdam (2023), which emphasise that female digital entrepreneurs perceive their presence in digital platforms as a way of being a part of a community

and networking, giving them a sense of belonging. They also acknowledged that as technology updates continuously, they are compelled to upgrade their skills and knowledge to run their digital businesses successfully. The interviewees emphasised the sense of accomplishment they experienced because of improved work-life flexibility, ability to contribute towards their families and the country's economic development and providing employment opportunities for others. Most importantly, as substantiated by previous studies, South Asian women prioritise motherhood and find great satisfaction in maintaining harmony between work and family without compromising their motherhood responsibilities (De Silva *et al.*, 2021; Mishra and Dey, 2022). Aligning with these previous findings, the present study also substantiates that motherhood plays a central role in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, the respondents greatly appreciate the flexibility offered by DE, which enabled them to fulfill their motherhood responsibilities without compromise. Furthermore, women show great pride and satisfaction about making a financial contribution to the family through their engagement in FDE. This study highlights personal growth and a sense of accomplishment as micro-level shifts that convey positive messages, fostering a more positive social perception of women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship. The findings of the study illustrate how individual-level transformation can catalyse broader social change.

Increased Status and Recognition

Another significant finding is that women are attaining higher social recognition, and transcending the marginalised identity traditionally assigned to them because of FDE. The findings demonstrate that women navigating the pathway of DE amidst heavy burdens enable them to uplift their status and recognition in the realms of family, kinship, community, and broader society. Respondents emphasised that at the family level, they have been able to gain much recognition, and they started playing a proactive role in the family decision-making process. Further, their businesses have given them increased visibility within the broader society, where they are invited to various events, media interviews, award ceremonies, and programmes. This finding also aligns with previous studies that confirm that FDE results in enhanced recognition of women in society, leading to the re-articulation of deep-rooted gender norms (Yu and Cui, 2019; McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison, 2020; Ughetto *et al*., 2020). It is also consistent with a study by Hewamanne (2020), which confirms that rural Sri Lankan women who launched entrepreneurial ventures successfully negotiated their identities and relationships within the village context, resulting in a significant

change in the social domain of being a woman. Not only local studies but also international research showed that women gained enhanced recognition within their families, kinship, and community due to their engagement in digital businesses (Yu and Cui, 2019; McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison, 2020; Ughetto *et al*., 2020). Hence, it is evident that the economic success achieved by these female digital entrepreneurs not only elevates their stature within their own communities but also fosters positive attitudes about DE as a viable career. Since shifting societal attitudes about DE is fundamental for attaining social legitimacy for FDE as a respectable and sustainable career path, such changes of perception are quite significant.

Enhanced Family Wellbeing and Economic Contribution

The increased economic status of women not only improved their well-being but also greatly influenced their families, as women tend to invest in their families' educational, healthcare needs, and overall well-being. This finding aligns with previous studies, which have shown that the economic empowerment of women leads to an improvement in the well-being of families, as women are more likely to invest in their families (Cardella, Hernández-Sánchez and Sánchez-García, 2020; De Silva *et al.*, 2021). Female entrepreneurship is recognised as a field which provides enormous contributions towards economic development, and the lack of women's participation in entrepreneurial activities can have detrimental effects on economic development (Greene *et al.*, 2003; Sajjad *et al.*, 2020). In the prevailing Sri Lankan context, the economic contribution of female digital entrepreneurs is particularly significant as the country struggles to overcome its economic crisis. Paul and Sarma (2013) emphasised the imperative role of female entrepreneurship in the context of economic crisis. Demonstrating the two-way interaction between FDE and the broader environment, when female digital entrepreneurs contribute to economic development, their contributions will enhance society's shared understanding of FDE and foster cultural acceptance. Another significant contribution of this study is its emphasis on how the economic contributions made by women through their engagement in FDE contribute not only to broader economic development but, owing to women's inherently family-oriented nature, how they contribute towards enhancing family-level well-being. This is a crucial indicator of societal well-being, which warrants attention from policymakers and those responsible for supporting the country's social and economic well-being.

Formalising FDE as a Serious Career

Another significant finding of the study is that female digital entrepreneurs perceive their businesses more seriously than they do as just a secondary source of income. The respondents of the study revealed bigger business dreams and targets. For instance, some are thinking about opening up physical businesses based on their experiences in doing business on digital platforms. Others mentioned their aspirations to expand their businesses internationally. Thus, the findings indicate that business growth and expansion are the foremost priorities of these women. Corroborating previous findings, the findings of the present study destabilises the axiomatic notion of the female underperformance hypothesis (Ahl, 2006; Marlow and McAdam, 2013; Dean *et al.*, 2019). It can be concluded that when women experience liberation from the existing unfavourable structural conditions, their growth aspirations related to their digital businesses are equal to those of men.

Additionally, women were enthusiastic about formalising DE, emphasising their commitment to running their businesses in an ethical and socially responsible manner. They discussed how they rally through digital platforms such as social networking groups to discourage unethical marketing practices used by female digital entrepreneurs, such as leveraging empathy to sell products. Thus, they foster women's commitment to ethical business practices. Overall, these findings underscore how having more women in DE will result in the legitimisation of FDE as a career pathway for women.

Performing as Role Models and Inspirational Leaders

Another striking finding is that women who have navigated the barriers and engaged in digital entrepreneurship, a male-dominated arena, are great role models for other women. Their presence on digital platforms makes it feasible for them to connect with other women who are interested in becoming digital entrepreneurs and provide them with the necessary inspiration and guidance. Respondents acknowledged that a lack of role models was a significant restraining factor they experienced when pursuing their digital entrepreneurial journey. They stated that they are working towards making up for it by actively engaging as role models for novice women entrepreneurs. In the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem, digital platforms and forums are

recognised as excellent sources for female entrepreneurs to access and connect with role models and mentors, as these platforms enable women to overcome the access-related conventional challenges they face (Meurer *et al.*, 2022; Schou, Bucher and Waldkirch, 2022; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023). Thus, female digital entrepreneurs who regularly use digital platforms tend to utilise these platforms to work as role models and mentors for other women interested in FDE hailing from different regions of the country. This finding is consistent with that of Yu and Cui (2019), who found that women who take part in digital entrepreneurial ventures will work as role models and mentors for other women. In the eyes of the respondents, one of the most significant benefits of women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship is the ability to instill confidence in the younger generation. One of the most striking findings is that these women stood up as a strong source of inspiration for their daughters. The respondents claimed that navigating the double-gender burden and reaching new heights that no woman has reached before, has enabled them to provide their daughters with living examples of what women are capable of. These results corroborate the findings of previous work about maternal influence on women's desire to engage in entrepreneurship (Greene, Han and Marlow, 2013; Jarvie-Eggart, Singer and Mathews, 2020).

In conclusion, the study's findings highlight that FDE paves the way for a powerful change in broader society about being a woman. The study demonstrates that female digital entrepreneurs who emerge in the presence of significant constraining conditions influence the existing context both directly and indirectly, which improves the conditions for women. However, it is worthwhile noting that despite these positive changes activated through women's engagement in DE, it is insufficient to dismantle the deep-rooted patriarchal gender norms completely. Even though there is an upgrade in terms of women's status due to their newly acquired roles, the findings also show that in the realm of DE, there is evidence of patriarchy being reinforced, which is discussed below.

8.3.2.2 Reinforcement of Patriarchy and Male Dominance in Digital Entrepreneurship

It is evident that, despite improvements in women's status due to their engagement in DE, in certain instances, the marginalisation experienced by women in the brick-and-mortar world persists or is even exacerbated in the virtual world. Even though their digital businesses enhanced their economic standing, quality of life, and social recognition, their new identity as female digital

entrepreneurs requires women to shoulder the dual responsibilities of business and home, which calls for multitasking. The double burden of running a business while shouldering the primary responsibility of household activities is a common concern that urges female entrepreneurs to engage in multi-tasking. However, this leads to difficulties in achieving a work-life balance (Panda, 2018; Jamali, 2009; Jennings and Brush, 2013). Furthermore, similar to the findings of the present study, previous scholars have recognised the difficulties experienced by women in maintaining work-life balance, particularly in digital and STEM entrepreneurship (Wang and Keane, 2020; Adikaram and Razik, 2023). While work-life balance is challenging for entrepreneurial women, the study's findings showcase that it offers specific challenges for women in DE. As families do not perceive digital businesses as a legitimate career requiring time commitment, they often think these female digital entrepreneurs have sufficient time to attend to all household activities. Some respondents revealed that, unlike earlier, their families tend to provide less support for household activities after they gave up full-time careers and took up digital entrepreneurship. In addition, some women in DE found it difficult to disconnect from businesses as they felt the urge for continuous availability, making it difficult for them to switch off the business mentality. This could make striking a work-life balance, the very reason that drove these women to pursue digital businesses in the first place, more challenging. This finding aligns with previous studies by Kelly and McAdam (2023) and Domenico, Daniel, and Nunan (2014), which emphasise the difficulties experienced by women in disconnecting from their business when they engage in digital businesses. Furthermore, the findings show that even though these women have made their presence known in the digital arena, their businesses are primarily confined to highly competitive female-dominated sectors, such as baking, cooking, and selling home décor items and clothing, where the key customers are also predominantly women. This finding is similar to previous studies that have revealed that due to structural barriers and inequalities, women tend to confine themselves to fiercely competitive, low-margin, and female-dominated sectors (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). Another striking finding, specifically related to the mild and moderate digital businesses, is that key functions of the business, such as handling digital aspects and finance, are often performed by men in the family. This involvement of men in more technical and skilled roles indicates that conventional gender roles persist in the digital business world. Moreover, it was also found that women become victims of different types of cyberstalking, which tends to have serious

emotional and psychological effects on them. Some respondents claimed that they had to temporarily close their businesses due to the adversities they faced as a result of cyberstalking.

In conclusion, it is evident that engagement in female digital entrepreneurship (FDE) results in the activation of a positive change in economic and social spheres related to women. However, a deeper exploration reveals that female digital entrepreneurs often face tradeoffs throughout their emancipatory journeys. Despite the empowering aspects of FDE, the influence and level of control held by male remain as a significant factor shaping women's participation. Furthermore, while women's involvement in digital entrepreneurship has initiated positive social transformations and contributed to shifting norms, these changes are still unfolding within a broader context marked by persistent patriarchal dominance.

8.4 Contributions to the Theory

This section addresses the theoretical contributions of the study by highlighting new insights that extend existing knowledge in the field. Specifically, it articulates what has been uncovered through this research that was previously unknown or underexplored. By situating the findings within current theoretical frameworks, the discussion demonstrates how the study advances understanding of FDE, reveals novel dynamics and mechanisms, and challenges. In doing so, it underscores the unique value this research brings to the academic discourse, offering fresh perspectives and informing future theoretical development in the area.

Contribution 01 The emancipatory potential of FDE in Sri Lanka is a comprehensive process

First, given the limited number of studies conducted thus far in this emerging field, the study contributes to legitimising the domain of FDE as an academic field (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019, 2020; Yu and Cui, 2019; Ughetto *et al*., 2020). Emancipation focuses on an entity's liberation from constrictive conditions vested upon them by the dominant powerholders

(Susen, 2015). Exploring the emancipatory pathway more holistically should focus on an entity's liberation from prevailing conditions and uplifting its position in social structures, which leads to activating broader societal changes (Baron, 1971; Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009). Especially when exploring emancipation, it is imperative to investigate how individual-level improvements that reflect empowerment enable women to collectively activate social-level changes and establish new norms more favourable towards FDE (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018; Trivedi and Petkova, 2022).

In particular, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the emancipatory potential of female digital entrepreneurship (FDE) by conceptualizing it as a comprehensive process influenced by multiple change factors. The findings demonstrate that FDE not only empowers individual women but also activates broader social change, highlighting its dynamic role in challenging and transforming established social structures. Study emphasizes exploring emancipation as a process require particularly focus on two perspectives namely the change factors that enable women to break free from constraints and engage in FDE, exploring how women who become female digital entrepreneurs become change-makers in the broader society. This holistic understanding makes a valuable contribution because, although the commonly accepted notion favours entrepreneurship as a means to empower women, the processes through which female entrepreneurship uplifts the state of women remain largely overlooked. On one hand, the study highlights the factors that encourage women to break the status quo, while on the other hand, it highlights the broader changes triggered by women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship. In light of the findings of this study, the researcher proposed a theoretical model that can be considered the most comprehensive effort made to date to understand emancipatory potential of FDE as a process within a contextualised environment of a developing South Asian country. The proposed theoretical model is given below in Figure 8.3.

In summary, the proposed theoretical model, which was developed based on the study findings, enables a comprehensive understanding of female digital entrepreneurship as an emancipatory effort. The model reflects the change factors that reinforce or restrain women from disrupting the status quo and engaging in digital entrepreneurship. Also, it illustrates how FDE results in changing the social status of being a woman. This addresses the calls for conducting

more studies on the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship and attaining a comprehensive understanding of digital entrepreneurship as an emancipatory process (McAdam, Crowley & Harrison, 2019, 2020; Alhajri & Aloud, 2024).

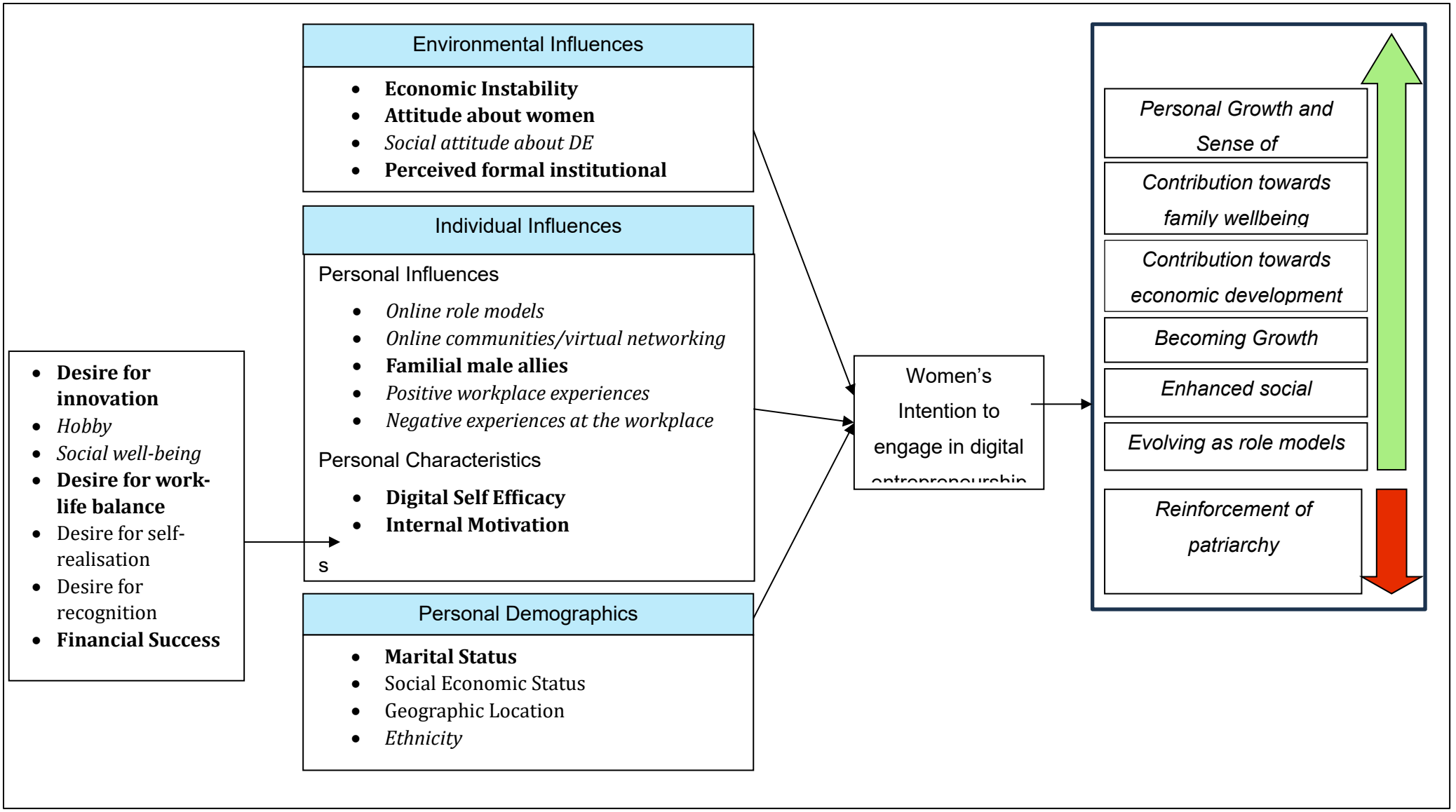

Figure 8.3 Proposed Theoretical Model

Contribution 02 The emancipatory potential of FDE reflects a two-way interaction between FDE and Context

The study offers valuable insights into the two-way interaction between FDE and contextual conditions, revealing how women's engagement in FDE is shaped by the context and how they actively shape their context through their new role as female digital entrepreneurs. In a broader sense, the study's findings reflect the interactive relationship between FDE and contextual conditions (Welter, 2004, 2020; McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison, 2020), showcasing how barriers for women and their coping strategies are shaped by the contextualised environment. It also shows how their FDE endeavours create broader social change. In a wider sense, holistically exploring the emancipatory potential of FDE caters to the need to go beyond contextualising gender and focusing on both contextualising gender and gendering the context, which Welter (2020) emphasised. The study's findings demonstrate that FDE is a context-bound phenomenon which align with Welter (2020) that female entrepreneurship is context-bound. To achieve a nuanced understanding of FDE, it is essential to examine not only how contextual conditions shape the experiences and opportunities of female digital entrepreneurs, but also how FDE itself reciprocally influences and transforms social, cultural, and institutional contexts.

Contribution 03 Advances IDTGIT by extending its application to two underexplored contexts: FDE and Global South.

The study significantly enhanced the robustness and explanatory power of the guiding theory of IDTGIT (Suseno and Abbott, 2021; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). While previous research applying IDTGIT has largely focused on women in IT employment, this study broadened its application to female digital entrepreneurship (FDE) and the Global South. This expansion not only strengthens the theoretical framework but also uncovers new dimensions that improve its explanatory capacity. By empirically testing IDTGIT in the South Asian context where it had not previously been examined this study contributes to the contextual validity of the theory.

The findings reveal that the influence of certain factors identified by IDTGIT is context-dependent, whereas others appear to be context-independent. For example, societal attitudes towards women's engagement in FDE are highly context-dependent. In Sri Lanka, changing societal norms are encouraging greater female participation, but the enduring presence of the traditional 'male breadwinner' model also continues to impact women's experiences in paradoxical ways. Thus, both progressive and traditional views simultaneously shape women's involvement in FDE. Additionally, the perception of digital entrepreneurship as a low-status, low-visibility career acts as a further context-dependent barrier for women.

Another context-dependent finding is the presence of "queen bee" dynamics, where some successful entrepreneurial women are reluctant to serve as role models for others, often due to feelings of threat or jealousy. This contrasts with previous studies, which attributed the lack of female role models mainly to external barriers such as limited opportunities or commuting difficulties (Ahl, 2006; Panda, 2018). Here, the study presents a new perspective on the issue.

Interestingly, fear of failure which was identified as a key barrier to women's entrepreneurship in other contexts (Koellinger, Minniti, and Schade, 2013; Tsai, Chang, and Peng, 2016b) was not identified as a critical deterrent among South Asian women aspiring to FDE. This suggests that the relationship between fear of failure and entrepreneurial intention is culturally contingent. South Asian women, accustomed to uncertainty in daily life, often display greater resilience to risk. Moreover, since women are not typically regarded as primary breadwinners, switching jobs or business failure is perceived as less risky, making fear of failure a less significant barrier.

Women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship driven by internal motives also emerged as a context-dependent phenomenon. Contrary to prior literature emphasizing necessity-driven entrepreneurship among women in developing nations, respondents in this study did not cite financial reasons as motivators. Instead, they highlighted the desire for innovation, freedom, and personal fulfillment. This can be traced to gender ideologies in Sri Lanka's patriarchal culture, where women are not expected to work or serve as financial providers. Notably, FDE has become a pathway for elite women to participate in economic activities, offering new insights into the role of intersectionality in digital entrepreneurship. The influence of social class, identified here as context-dependent, has received little attention in previous literature and suggests promising directions for future research.

A particularly noteworthy, and possibly context-independent, finding is the significant role of familial male allies in supporting women's engagement in FDE. While the importance of male allies in promoting women's participation in IT has been observed in Ireland (Trauth and Connolly, 2021) a context quite different from Sri Lanka the presence of supportive men appears to be a recurring factor in male-dominated sectors regardless of cultural context. While male allies should be recognized as a source of support, their involvement also highlights the extent to which male control is still maintained a nuance that deserves greater academic attention.

Contribution 04 Heterogeneity of experiences as gender intersects with other social ascriptions

Fourthly, this study contributes to the literature by challenging the notion of women as a homogeneous group and highlights how intersectional differences shape their paths to emancipation. Investigating the interplay of gender with other social characteristics, such as marital status, geographical location, socioeconomic status, educational level, and ethnicity, sheds light on the complexity of the female digital entrepreneurs' experience. Taking an intersectionality perspective enriched the understanding of FDE in the Sri Lankan context by highlighting that even within Sri Lanka, there is heterogeneity in the experiences of female digital entrepreneurs. This study can therefore be considered one of the first attempts to examine how variation among women, based on gender intersectionality, shapes their engagement in FDE and liberation potential in the South Asian context. One of the surprising and unexpected finding of the study, that FDE work as a pathway for elite women to navigate the barriers and engage in economic activities represents a novel contribution to the understanding of role of intersectionality in the FDE.

Contribution 05 Additional contributions

In addition to the central contributions, the study made several additional worthwhile contributions that enriched and expanded the subject knowledge. The existing literature on FDE is currently characterized by a significant lack of definitional consensus. Existing research

frequently applies the term FDE with varying interpretations, often conflating it with broader concepts of women's entrepreneurship or digital business activity (Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). While scholarly efforts have been dedicated to defining the broader fields of digital entrepreneurship and female entrepreneurship, previous studies have generally not attempted to specifically define FDE. For any field lack of definitional consensus may lead to conceptual ambiguity, making it difficult to compare findings across studies or to build a coherent theoretical framework for understanding (Urban, 2010). To address this gap, the present study undertook a comprehensive review of the extant literature, critically examining the ways in which FDE has been conceptualized and applied. Drawing on the insights gained from this review, by integrating the definitions related to female entrepreneurship and digital entrepreneurship the study offers a new and more refined definition of FDE that captures its distinctive characteristics and boundaries. By providing this conceptual clarity, the study contributes not only to advancing theoretical understanding but also to supporting more rigorous and comparable future research. Therefore, it can be concluded that the introduction of a nuanced definition of FDE thus represents a significant contribution of this work to the academic field.

Furthermore, than being confined to high-tech ventures, the researcher ensured the inclusion of a broad range of digital businesses that align with the definition given by Hull *et al*. (2007), which enabled a more comprehensive understanding of women's experience in FDE. In the past, when exploring digital entrepreneurship, more focus was given to high-tech businesses, which has resulted in a neglect of the wide range of businesses that rely on digital technologies. Hence, researchers have emphasised the importance of incorporating a range of digital businesses, rather than focusing solely on a niche area of high-tech businesses. This is because including a wider range of businesses helps gain a more comprehensive understanding of how women can uplift their conditions through their engagement in a wide array of digital businesses (Novo-Corti, Varela-Candamio and García-Álvarez, 2014; Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017a; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019). Therefore, this study can be recognised as an effort to fully understand the wider impact of diverse digital technology-based businesses.

8.5 Highlights of the Key Findings

Providing a comprehensive understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE, the study shed light on many interesting and important findings related to the factors that drive women to break the status quo and engage in FDE. The study also demonstrated how their engagement in FDE triggers a transformation in the social order within a resource-constrained and highly patriarchal societal context. While the study unearthed many important findings, this section aims to summarise the key findings, highlighting the most significant insights derived from the study, which are critical to advancing knowledge in the discipline.

Spotlighting the critical areas that require more attention makes policy interventions more effective, as policymakers can provide more targeted interventions. In Table 8.2 below, the environmental and individual factors influencing female participation in DE in the Sri Lankan context, as well as the social transformation activated through FDE, are systematically summarised based on the findings. This provides a precise and clear, yet nuanced understanding of the factors influencing FDE in Sri Lanka, a resource-constrained and highly patriarchal context.

Table 8.2 Key Findings about Factors of Change and Social Transformation

Environmental Factors	Individual Factors	Identity Factors	Social Transformation Activated Through FDE
Economy • Economic uncertainties as a driving force for FDE • FDE as an antidote for the contraction of labour markets resulted in pay cuts and job losses. • With hyperinflation, family survival with a single income became challenging, which drove housewives to engage in FDE. • The dollar crisis resulted in import bans and product crises, which opened new market opportunities for FDE. ***Societal Attitudes About Women*** • Uneven yet gradual transformation of societal attitudes toward women. • The Sri Lankan economy's opening and the country's different economic shocks intermittently resulted in shifting societal attitudes about women from seeing them as	***Personal Influences*** ***Familial Male Allies*** • Encouragement from the male family members for women to pursue DE. • Fathers engage in gender egalitarian parenting style. • Fathers and husbands shield women in FDE against negative comments from society and help their businesses. • In the male chauvinistic social context, where families are headed by men, blessings, and support from male family members work as a critical factor for FDE. ***Role Models*** • The proliferation of online role models with the networking affordances offered by digital platforms. • The emergence of "Queen bees" where accomplished female	***Marital Status*** • Being married reinforces desire to pursue FDE. • Based on the culture, fulfilling the roles of a "dutiful wife" and a "good mother" are pivotal for women. • FDE is perceived as a pathway for work-life balance. • Stronger surveillance from society is directed at single women. Thus, before marriage, they are disinclined to engage in FDE which is perceived as a less recognised career. • Internal motivation has a stronger impact on FDE for married women due to lessening of the social surveillance, the strong urge for work-life balance, and support from husbands. **Social Economic Status (SES)**	***Personal Growth*** • Women mark improvement in their financial status; social exposure; achieving work-life harmony; and sharpening skills. ***Contribution Towards Family Wellbeing*** • The increased financial status of women results in enhanced family well-being. ***Contribution Towards Economic Development*** • The proliferation of FDE enables women's active engagement in the country's economic development. ***Formalising FDE as a serious career*** • Women harbour growth aspirations

"housewives" to perceiving them as a "docile segment of economic contributors". • Persistence of the conventional norm of lower family expectations of financial and career success of women made it easier for them to pursue DE, which has less social recognition and involves higher risk than pursuing a stable job. ***Formal Institutional Support*** • Lack of state sector support for FDE. • Chronic political instabilities and state sector inefficiencies have long been recognised as restraining forces for entrepreneurship in South Asia, where things are more detrimental to FDE. • Lack of support from government officials due to their poor attitudes related to work and lack of knowledge about DE. • Favoritism and nepotism in the state sector made programmes to enhance the FDE insufficiently inclusive.	digital entrepreneurs distance themselves from others and are reluctant to act as role models for other women as they feel threatened and jealous. ***Virtual Networking Groups*** • Women develop friendships with other women through Facebook groups (especially via Facebook groups dedicated to women) as a reinforcing factor. • The friendships and sisterhood bonds they created gave them emotional support and the opportunity to share knowledge and promote businesses. ***Previous Work Experience*** • Work experience helps women to sharpen their skills, and knowledge and to get exposure which enables them to bridge the gaps resulting from the poor educational policies in the country. • Negative experiences such as discriminatory practices, and sudden layoffs have also	• FDE pathways are not constrictive by the women's low SES. • For high-class women FDE works as a liberating pathway. These women are experiencing barriers for engaging in economic activities, as taking up outside jobs is perceived as a disgrace to the family. ***Geographical Location*** • Geographical location has a mixed impact on FDE. • Rural women acknowledged that FDE is a means to overcome geographical barriers. Meanwhile, they acknowledged the detrimental effects of the urban-rural digital divide and language divide. • The motivation to engage in FDE is stronger for women in rural areas due to the limited career opportunities available to them. ***Educational Attainments*** • Educational attainments do not influence FDE.	about their digital businesses. • Women acknowledge the unethical marketing practices undertaken by the fellow female digital entrepreneurs and emphasise the importance of taking efforts individually and collectively to foster an ethical culture within their community. ***Enhanced Social Recognition*** • FDE enables women to uplift their status, and recognition in the realms of family, kinship, community, and broader society. ***Female Digital Entrepreneurs Evolving as Role Models*** • Female digital entrepreneurs often like to appear as role models and inspirational leaders for other women in the Sri Lankan context.

• No critical issue regarding gender equality in access to formal education, however, the prevailing education system is poor and inadequate to foster a conducive culture.	reinforced women's transition from corporate jobs to digital entrepreneurship.	• Poor educational policies of the government that do not focus on enhancing digital competencies, entrepreneurship, and language proficiency. • Learning affordances offered by digital platforms enable filling the gaps in the formal education system. • Outdated curriculum that reinforces patriarchal gender norms.	
Perceived Occupational Prestige Disparity • Societal attitudes about DE as a less dignified career. • An educationally heavy culture where pursuing jobs as engineers, doctors, and accountants, reflecting academic success are recognised in the society. But entrepreneurship is perceived as a low-status job. • Lack of recognition is more severe for DE due to its lack of visibility.	***Personal Characteristics*** ***Digital Self-Efficacy*** • Despite the varying digital skills among different levels of digital entrepreneurs, they expressed confidence in their digital competencies relative to the demands of their specific businesses. • Women enjoy enhancing their digital capabilities through digital platforms. • Women who belong to the category of mild and moderate digital entrepreneurs perceive digital agency as social media proficiency, which may have debilitating effects on the growth of their digital businesses in the long run. ***Internal Motivation*** • Internal motivation represents a	***Ethnicity*** • Ethnic minority women have been able to overcome the barriers they face in the brick-and-mortar world through FDE.	***Reinforcement of patriarchal gender norms*** • Female digital entrepreneurs experience tiresome multi-tasking. • Operating in low-growth and highly competitive markets that cater to female customers. • Key business functions such as digital technology, marketing campaigns, and financial management are confined to the male family members. • Female digital entrepreneurs become victims of cyberstalking and cybercrimes.

	multifaceted construct with various interconnected motives. • Unlike previous studies that emphasised financial motives are significant, this study found that both intrinsic motives and economic motives are important for FDE. • Controversial results can be attributed to the deep-rooted gender norms in a society where families have lesser career expectations for daughters and wives. ***Fear of Failure*** • Respondents' acknowledging the awareness of the risk involved in the FDE. • With various uncertainties related to their personal and social spheres of life, South Asian Women tend to be equipped with resilience and adaptability over time which enables them to face ambiguities and risks in a much more effective manner.		

8.6 Conclusion

This study examined the factors that influence women to disrupt the status quo and engage in FDE, and how their engagement in FDE activates a social transformation. The findings of the study highlight the wide array of environmental and individual factors influencing women to engage in FDE, which is perceived as a male domain. Further, the findings were able to shed light on how the intersectional dynamics are influencing women's engagement in FDE. Ultimately, the findings of the study substantiate how women navigating the FDE result in challenging the deep-rooted norms and creating a social order that is more favourable for women. By integrating the findings from the qualitative and quantitative studies, the researcher was able to derive meta-inferences about the emancipatory potential of FDE in the Sri Lankan context. These meta-inferences enabled the proposing of a theoretical model that provides a more comprehensive understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE by perceiving emancipation as a process.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion

Chapter 9: Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

Efforts will be made in this chapter to summarise and reflect on the study's contribution, implications, and limitations. At the outset, the researcher will provide a recap of the study emphasising its key findings. Next, the study's contributions to the discipline of FDE will be elaborated upon, highlighting how the current research has enabled the bridging of gaps in the existing literature. Thereafter, a concise view of the key contributions of the study will be provided through a table that shows theoretical, empirical, methodological, contextual, and practical contributions. The study's implications for practitioners and policymakers will also be discussed. Finally, reflections on the limitations will be discussed while presenting directions for future research.

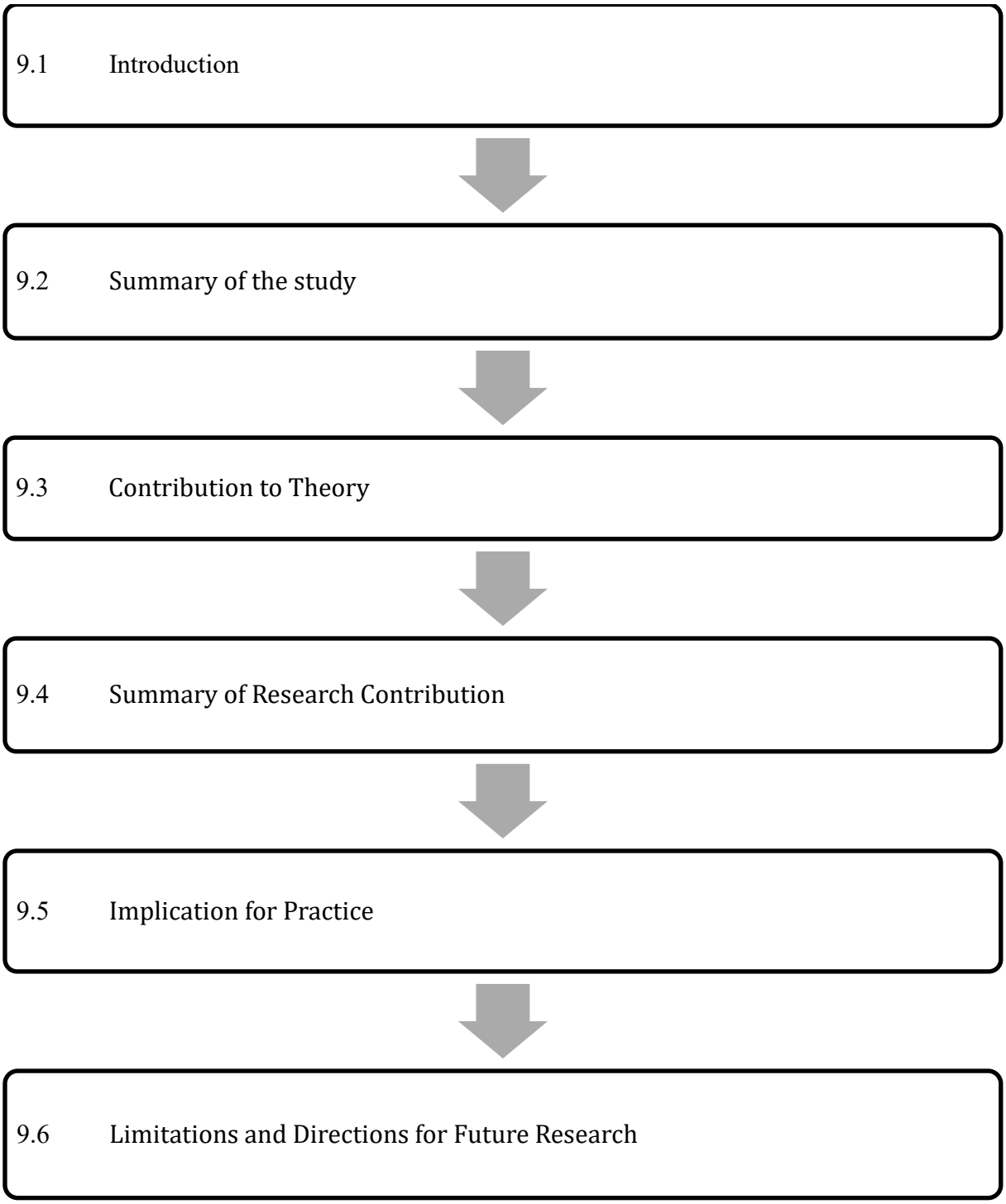

Figure 9.1 Chapter Structure

9.2 Summary of the Study

The study aimed to holistically understand the emancipatory potential of FDE in Sri Lanka, taking into account its unique contextual conditions. The concept of emancipation related to women encompasses both disrupting the status quo that constrains women in society and actively changing the social order to improve women's position (Trivedi and Petkova, 2022). Therefore, when exploring digital entrepreneurship as an emancipatory force, it is imperative to investigate the factors that influence women to disrupt the status quo, challenge widely accepted social norms, and explore the social change activated through FDE. A rigorous review of the literature on FDE was conducted to identify knowledge gaps and determine appropriate theories and constructs related to the study. As FDE is a novel and emerging field of research, the literature review began with exploring entrepreneurship to attain a well-grounded understanding of the area. Then, it moved to female entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship, and ultimately, FDE. This approach enabled the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of FDE as an intersection of female and digital entrepreneurship. In light of the literature review, IDTGIT was recognised as the most appropriate theory for identifying factors influencing FDE. To explore the factors that influence women's participation in digital entrepreneurship, a conceptual framework was developed based on the IDTGIT framework. When developing the conceptual framework, the specific contextual conditions of Sri Lanka were considered. Furthermore, to gain a broader understanding of this dyadic relationship, which focuses on how broader contextual factors influence female digital entrepreneurial participation and how FDE can facilitate social change, other theories such as role congruity theory of prejudice, intersectionality, and digital affordances were employed.

The overall study comprised three stages. During the first stage, the researcher conducted five informal interviews with experts (See Chapter 3) to explore how the concept of FDE was perceived at the grassroots level, as FDE is a novel area in the Sri Lankan context. Moreover, since female digital entrepreneurs are underrepresented in the country, the researcher also focused on gaining access to women who are pursuing digital entrepreneurial ventures. Stages two and three, the main study, were conducted using a sequential mixed-method approach. At stage two, the quantitative study tested the hypothesised relationship between change factors and their influence on female participation in digital entrepreneurship. Ultimately, at stage three, a qualitative study

was conducted to explore how and why these change factors reinforce or restrain FDE and identify the broader social changes activated through women's engagement in FDE.

The findings provided nuanced insight into FDE, revealing that in the Sri Lankan context, digital entrepreneurship enables women to disrupt the status quo and establish a new gender order. It was also demonstrated that when broader environmental and individual-level factors create a conducive environment for FDE, women can disrupt the status quo and flourish as digital entrepreneurs. Further, it was unearthed that not only do the contextual conditions influence women's entrepreneurial propensity, but that FDE also activates changes in context, albeit the evidence of certain aspects where patriarchy has been reinforced. Evidently, there is a duality of effects of women's participation in FDE which demonstrates both an uplifting of the conditions of women and reinforcing the patriarchy. This is due to the complex interplay among gender, entrepreneurship, digital technology, and contextual conditions. However, when considered as a whole, the benefits of transformational change in the social order produced by FDE outweigh the subordination that is reproduced.

In the following sections, a nuanced discussion of the findings will lead to the identification of the contributions of this study. Thereafter, the study's limitations will be discussed because acknowledging the limitations of the research process paves the way for future studies to build upon the current work.

9.3 Advancing Knowledge Through Addressing Research Gaps

This section emphasises how the study contributes to the body of knowledge and advancement of theory on FDE by bridging the gaps in extant literature. As discussed below, the study provides a wealth of insights into the literature.

Ultimately, the study contributes to the ongoing debate about whether digital entrepreneurship provides a ‘great leveller’ for women or whether the inequalities in the brick-and-mortar world are reinforced in the digital environment. The study's findings substantiate that FDE enables women to overcome various constraints and initiate social change, despite the

continued prevalence of male dominance in digital spheres. While digital entrepreneurship offers an excellent platform for empowering women to bring about significant social change, it may still perpetuate certain gendered expectations similar to those in the physical realm. Therefore, further studies are needed that focus on the experiences of female digital entrepreneurs in diverse geographical contexts, as this paves the way for identifying context-dependent variations and contributes to building a more nuanced understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE.

I. Limited studies on female digital entrepreneurship

The unprecedented digital transformation from the advancement of the Internet has affected all aspects of broader society, including female entrepreneurship. However, despite the proliferation marked by FDE, it has received limited academic attention thus far, and only a few studies have explored the women's experiences of digital entrepreneurship (Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; Luo and Chan, 2021; Alhothali and Al-Dajani, 2022; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025). The only structured literature review paper on FDE to date, authored by Alhajri and Aloud (2024), emphasises that the literature on this newly emerging field of FDE is insufficient and fragmented, with many unexplored and under-explored areas. Therefore, conducting more studies on FDE by integrating the proliferation of digital and women's entrepreneurship is important. Fostering knowledge in this field by conducting studies on the various aspects of FDE is key to advancing the body of knowledge in this area. Thus, at its inception, this study addresses the call for conducting more studies in the emerging and promising field of FDE and helps build the body of knowledge needed to legitimise it.

II. There is a need to move beyond identifying barriers for women and focus on how women navigate these barriers.

The societal expectations regarding the dominant role women play in household and family care responsibilities, combined with the male-dominant connotation associated with fields such as entrepreneurship and IT, make women's pathways in these fields more challenging. Therefore, the existing literature on female entrepreneurship and women's engagement in the IT sector/STEM predominantly focuses on the discriminatory practices and

challenges they face in these fields (Molina-López *et al.*, 2021; Adikaram and Razik, 2023). Although considerable efforts have been made to understand the barriers faced by female entrepreneurs, the strategies women employ to navigate these barriers and the approaches they implement have received limited academic attention (Trivedi and Petkova, 2022; Audretsch, Belitski and Brush, 2022; Semkunde *et al.*, 2022). While it is imperative to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers experienced by women, it is equally important to explore how they navigate these challenges. Although the commonly accepted notion in everyday discourse favours FDE as a great leveller that enables women to overcome the structural and institutional barriers, there is an emerging debate in the scholarly field about the extent to which digital entrepreneurship provides an inclusive and equitable pathway for women (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020). To bridge the gaps in the existing literature, this study explored FDE as a pathway to overcome the contextual barriers faced by women. These insights have the potential to enable governments and policymakers to make informed decisions that could better address the existing needs of female digital entrepreneurs from developing economies (Molina-López *et al.*, 2021).

III. Exploring the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship

Since entrepreneurship is predominantly an economic venture, many entrepreneurship studies focus on the aspect of wealth creation, and limited attention is given to the non-economic outcomes of entrepreneurship (Jennings and Brush, 2013). Yet, to stabilise knowledge on entrepreneurship, it is crucial to go beyond wealth creation and explore how entrepreneurship has broader socio-economic effects. Especially when it comes to the domain of FDE, the need for exploring the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship has been highlighted by many scholars (Dy, Martin and Marlow, 2018; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020; Luo and Chan, 2021; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). To date, only a handful of studies have been conducted to explore the liberation potential of digital entrepreneurship, and the findings are inconclusive and insufficient to gain a comprehensive understanding. While some studies favour the popular notion that digital entrepreneurship provides a liberating pathway for women to overcome the barriers they experience (Martin and Wright, 2005; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023), other studies provided contradictory results which emphasised that digital platforms reproduce or exacerbate inequalities experienced by women (Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017b; Luo and Chan, 2021). These inconclusive findings

highlight the need for more studies on the liberating effects of FDE. The literature emphasises the importance of exploring entrepreneurship as emancipatory, with a broader understanding of the nuances and complexities of emancipation. According to Rindova, Barry, and Ketchen (2009), emancipation is a broader concept that focuses on the whole process of disrupting the status quo that historically marginalised a segment of individuals and striving to elevate the position of such marginalised individuals in the social order. This underscores the need to comprehensively understand FDE as an emancipatory pathway, focusing on what drives FDE and how women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship alters the social order. This further substantiates the need to conduct studies on the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship, perceiving it as a relative phenomenon that depends on the challenges experienced by women, according to the contextual conditions (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019). The present study makes a notable contribution to literature by offering a nuanced understanding of FDE, acknowledging the complexity inherent in studying digital entrepreneurship as an emancipatory pathway.

The current study provides insights into the holistic process of women's emancipation through their engagement in FDE. This focuses especially on the change factors that enable women to break free from constraints and engage in FDE, exploring how women who become female digital entrepreneurs become change-makers in the broader society. This holistic understanding makes a valuable contribution because, although the commonly accepted notion favours entrepreneurship as a means to empower women, the processes through which female entrepreneurship uplifts the state of women remain largely overlooked. On one hand, the study highlights the factors that encourage women to break the status quo, while on the other hand, it highlights the broader changes triggered by women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship.

IV. There is a need to place greater emphasis on intersectionality

Recently, scholars have emphasised the importance of acknowledging heterogeneity among women when investigating female entrepreneurial experiences (Jensen, 2011; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). Researchers have challenged the notion of recognising women as a homogeneous segment by highlighting how women's experiences and agentic possibilities are shaped by the way their gender intersects with other markers of differences (Jones *et al.*, 2025; McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison, 2020; Benali and Villesèche, 2024). Therefore, research on female entrepreneurship

calls for studies to explore how gender intersects with other social ascriptions and influences women's entrepreneurial journey (Ahl, 2006; Jennings and Brush, 2013; Benali & Villesèche, 2024). Specifically, literature on FDE has highlighted the importance of exploring how gender intersects with other social ascriptions and how it influences the form of emancipation that women can pursue through their engagement in digital entrepreneurship (Marlow and Dy, 2018; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Adikaram and Razik, 2023; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). Alhajri and Aloud (2023) emphasised the importance of exploring digital entrepreneurship in the context of intersectionality in developing countries. Addressing the recent call for conducting studies on FDE by integrating intersectionality approaches, this study explored how women's gender intersects with their marriage, geographical location, socioeconomic status (SES), education, and ethnicity, and influences their emancipatory pathway.

The present research's findings acknowledge the importance of exploring heterogeneity among female entrepreneurs. The study demonstrates that even within the Sri Lankan context, women's experiences may differ as their gender intersects with other social ascriptions such as class, age, and education etc. Most importantly, the research reveals that FDE serves as a unique pathway for elite women to overcome barriers and actively participate in economic activities an aspect that has been largely overlooked in prior literature. By highlighting how social class intersects gender in shaping women's entrepreneurial opportunities and strategies, this study opens new avenues for empirical inquiry and sets a foundation for future scholarship in this area. This novel insight represents a major advancement in the study of FDE and intersectionality. Thus, this study reinforces the idea that if governments are to facilitate and encourage women entrepreneurs effectively, tailormade measures need to be taken based on real-life experiences of women.

V. Greater attention is to be given to contextual diversity

Emancipation is a relative phenomenon because a person's pursuit of freedom will be based on extant conditions in which they are embedded. When exploring entrepreneurial efforts as emancipatory, it is imperative to understand the barriers individuals experience because their liberation efforts and the agency they demonstrate are relative to the conditions they have to circumnavigate (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023). Even though the marginalisation of women in the business world is a universal concern, the extent of

marginalisation is heterogeneous based on contextual conditions. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, barriers experienced by women are further reinforced by the gender segregation imposed by law (McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison, 2020), which is contrary to the situation in Sri Lanka, where barriers are not legally enforced but infused by the deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms and post-colonial ethos (Hewamanne, 2020). Thus, researchers have emphasised the imperativeness of considering context when exploring female entrepreneurship, as contexts and entrepreneurial efforts are mutually dependent (Welter, 2011, 2020; Welter *et al.*, 2017). This is true for FDE as well, and scholars have emphasised the need for exploring contextual aspects when investigating FDE (McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison, 2020; Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; Wiig, Schou, and Hansen, 2023; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). Meeting these demands for conducting more studies by considering the context-embedded nature of FDE, the present study focuses on attaining a more contextualised understanding of FDE and emphasises the contextual diversity in Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, Welter (2020) explained the need to go beyond the influence of contexts on female entrepreneurship (contextualising gender) and focus on how female entrepreneurs change the contextual conditions (gendering of context). McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison (2019) and Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou (2025) further emphasised the need to explore the two-way relationship between the influence of institutional conditions on female digital entrepreneurship and digital entrepreneurship as an institution-altering behaviour. Since the present study views emancipation as a holistic process, it acknowledges both the contextualisation of gender and the gendering of context as integral parts of the process. In other words, when exploring emancipation as a holistic process, the researcher first looked at what drives women to break the status quo (which aligns with contextualising gender) and then focused on how women's engagement in FDE results in changing the social order to create more favorable conditions for women (which aligns with gendering of context).

This study offers valuable insights into the two-way interaction between FDE and contextual conditions, revealing how women's engagement in FDE is shaped by the context and how they actively shape their context through their new role as female digital entrepreneurs. While previous literature has emphasized how women's experiences in the entrepreneurial arena are shaped by contextual factors, when exploring the emancipatory potential of FDE, it is imperative

to consider not only how context shapes women's participation, but also how women's involvement in FDE can actively restructure and transform those contextual conditions. This reciprocal relationship highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of both the influence of context on FDE and the transformative impact that women entrepreneurs can have within their socio-cultural environments.

VI Addressing the weak theoretical base in prior studies and contributing to the advancement of IDTGIT

Researchers have raised concerns about early research on female entrepreneurship being atheoretical because these studies neither applied theory nor contributed to theory (Brush, 1992; Fischer, Reuber and Dyke, 1993). Yet, scholars have emphasised the importance of using theory when investigating FDE (Suseno and Abbott, 2021). Although researchers have recently made efforts to conduct studies that address this theoretical gap, FDE research is still hindered by the lack of a strong theoretical foundation. For example, Ahl (2006) emphasised that studies on female entrepreneurship are generally weak in their theoretical foundations. Related to the IS literature, researchers have also emphasised the limited use of theory in studies that address gender and technology (Adam, Howcroft and Richardson, 2004; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Thus, it is evident that using theory to explore the complex reality of FDE is imperative. Not only was the limited use of theory a concern, but researchers have criticised the appropriateness of the theories developed in light of the male-led ventures to study the entrepreneurial engagement of women and other marginalised segments (Greene *et al.*, 2003). Similarly, in the field of women in IT, Trauth and Connolly (2021) highlighted that one of the significant challenges when exploring women's limited involvement in the IT field is the limited theory used to explain the problem. To bridge the gaps in existing literature, this study made meticulous efforts to apply theories in exploring the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship. While the researcher broadly relied on the theoretical lens of emancipation and the role congruity theory of prejudice to explain the marginalisation experienced by women and their liberation efforts, the exploration of the change factors that drive women to disrupt the status quo was shaped by the IDTGIT. Furthermore, the lens of intersectionality was employed to explain the heterogeneity experienced by women in their entrepreneurial journeys and digital affordances, thereby further elucidating the potential for

liberation offered by digital technologies. These efforts enabled the bridging of the gaps between the limited use of theories and inappropriate theories when exploring FDE.

The study contributed to enhancing the robustness and explanatory power of the guiding theory of IDTGIT. While existing studies applying IDTGIT are confined to the context of women in IT employment and Global North, this study expanded the use of IDTGIT to the context of FDE and to the Global South. It not only enhances the robustness of theoretical frameworks but also helps uncover new dimensions that may improve their explanatory power. Empirically testing IDTGIT within the South Asian context, where it has not previously been examined, also contributes to the contextual validity of IDTGIT. An analysis of the predicted change factors based on the IDTGIT framework reveals that certain influences are highly context-dependent, exhibiting characteristics and impacts that are unique to the Sri Lankan context. Conversely, other factors demonstrate context-independent effects, suggesting a broader applicability beyond the local setting. This distinction underscores the importance of situating theoretical constructs within specific socio-cultural environments while recognizing universal relevance of certain aspects of gender ideologies and women's experiences. Moreover, exploring emancipation as a process and taking into account the two-way interaction between gender and context, provided broader theoretical implications beyond the IDTGIT-based change factors that shape women's engagement in FDE. The study also recognised the social change activated through FDE and lays the groundwork for incorporating the aspect of social change triggered by women's engagement in FDE. In the future, when research applying IDTGIT is used to attain a more comprehensive understanding of gender equity in the IT field, it can explore both the change factors shaping women's engagement in the IT field and how their engagement in the IT field impacts changes in the social structure.

VII. The dearth of mixed-method studies

As the method used by researchers plays an imperative role in legitimising a particular discipline (Treanor, 2022), those exploring novel fields like FDE should pay considerable attention to their methodological approach. When examining the extant literature, it is evident that studies on FDE lag behind in terms of diversity of epistemological and methodological approaches (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). In the current context, studies on FDE are predominantly characterised

by a qualitative approach, as the research field is still in its early stages of development (Zaheer, Breyer and Dumay, 2019; Treanor, 2022; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). While appreciating the role played by the qualitative approach, researchers have emphasised the importance of applying more innovative and diverse methodologies to attain a broader understanding of the problems and to legitimise the field (Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). Mixed-methodology approaches have potential in enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and in building and testing the theory within the same study. Therefore, scholars' interest in mixed methodology was proliferated in the field of digital entrepreneurship (Molina-Azorín *et al.*, 2012; Eliakis *et al.*, 2020) as well as in FDE (Dy & Agwunobi, 2019; Chakraborty & Biswal, 2023). The present study used the mixed-method approach to address these calls for diverse methodological approaches. Through the use of mixed methods, the researcher has gained a more comprehensive understanding of the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship, a multifaceted and complex area.

VIII. Exploring experiences of wider range of female digital entrepreneurs and addressing the lack of definitional consensus on FDE

In addition to addressing the recognised central gaps, the study made several worthwhile contributions that enriched and expanded the subject knowledge. Unlike previous research that focused primarily on high-tech ventures, this study includes a broad spectrum of digital businesses, following the definition by Hull et al. (2007). This inclusive approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences in FDE and addresses the need highlighted by researchers to study a wider range of digital businesses beyond the high-tech sector inclusion of a wider range of businesses helps gain a more comprehensive understanding of how women can uplift their conditions through their engagement in a wide array of digital businesses (Novo-Corti, Varela-Candamio and García-Álvarez, 2014; Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017a; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019). Therefore, this study can be recognised as an effort to fully understand the wider impact of diverse digital technology-based businesses. Furthermore, as the existing literature on FDE is currently characterized by a significant lack of definitional consensus proposing a clear definition of FDE is another important contribution of this study. This conceptual clarification addresses an existing gap in the literature and provides a foundation for more consistent research in the field.

Overall, it is evident that this study fills notable gaps in the existing literature and provides new insights that are crucial for advancing the field of female digital entrepreneurship.

9.4 Summary of Research Contributions

This study demonstrated holistically the picture of the emancipatory potential of female digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka, a developing South Asian country. Moreover, it makes significant contributions to the development of both theory and practice in the field of women's digital entrepreneurship. The findings of the study highlight a broad array of environmental and personal factors that influence women's participation in digital entrepreneurship as a liberating pathway amidst the double-gender barriers they experience as both technology and entrepreneurship are male domains (Grangeiro & Neto, 2023). Further, it sheds light on how women activate social change through their engagement in digital entrepreneurship. The study's findings substantiate that with the support they derive from the specific environmental and individual factors, women can disrupt the status quo and successfully engage in digital entrepreneurship, which in turn, enables them to activate broader social change. The specific findings of this study make significant theoretical and empirical contributions to the body of knowledge on FDE. Moreover, attaining an in-depth understanding of the factors that reinforce women's participation in digital entrepreneurship is vital. This is primarily because it generates more actionable insights that facilitate concrete interventions to redress the gender imbalance in digital entrepreneurship. The summary of the key contributions derived from the study is provided in Table 9.1 below.

Table 9.1 Summary of the Key Contributions of the Study

Area	Call for Research	Contribution of this Research
Empirical	Studies in the broader field of female entrepreneurship are mainly confined to the challenges experienced by women when engaging in entrepreneurship (Semkunde *et al.*, 2022).	The present study went beyond exploring barriers for female digital entrepreneurs and wealth creation. The study focused on understanding the emancipatory potential of FDE in the Sri Lankan context.
	Literature on the FDE focused on the wealth creation, and limited academic attention was given to change creation (Leong *et al.*, 2022).	The study unearthed factors that influence women to break the status quo and engage in digital entrepreneurship. It also identified the social change activated through FDE.
	Future studies should focus more on the reinforcing factors that encourage women to navigate digital entrepreneurship despite the double-gender barriers they experience (Molina-López *et al.*, 2021; Shukla *et al.*, 2021; Semkunde *et al.*, 2022).	
	The emancipatory potential of FDE is a novel area that has received limited academic attention thus far (Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017a; McAdam, Crowley & Harrison, 2019;	The findings of this study revealed that, apart from a few aspects that showcase the reproduction/replication of female subordination, FDE generally functions as a liberating pathway for women in Sri Lanka.

	Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Wiig, Schou & Hansen, 2023). Scholars have emphasised the importance of exploring the experiences of FDE in light of the intersectionality perspective (McAdam, Crowley & Harrison, 2019; Alhajri and Aloud, 2023; Adikaram and Razik, 2022; Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018). Future studies should focus on drawing insights from actual female digital entrepreneurs instead of university students to attain a more realistic understanding of the phenomenon (Shukla *et al.*, 2021).	The study explored how intersectionality impacts the diversity of experience among women in FDE. The findings challenge the notion of perceiving female digital entrepreneurs as a homogeneous group. Insights were attained from female digital entrepreneurs who have started and are running digital businesses in Sri Lanka.
Theoretical	To attain a comprehensive understanding, studies should focus on an entity's freeing from prevailing conditions and uplifting its position in social structures, which leads to activating broader societal changes (Rindova, Barry, and Ketchen, 2009; Trivedi and Petkova, 2022; Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). The theoretical base for studies on female entrepreneurship is weak (Brush, 1992; Fischer, Reuber and Dyke, 1993;	Based on the findings, a framework that reflects the emancipatory potential of FDE as a comprehensive process was proposed. To address the issue of the atheoretical nature of the field, the study relied on IDTGIT, intersectionality, and digital

	Ahl, 2006). Studies about women's participation in the IT sector also lack a sufficient theoretical base (Suseno and Abbott, 2021; Trauth and Connolly, 2021). Trauth and Connolly (2021) emphasised the importance of applying this dynamic theory of individual differences theory of gender and IT (IDTGIT) in different contexts to further refine and develop the theory.	affordances as the base to explain the liberation potential offered by FDE. The study drew upon the IDTGIT to examine the factors influencing women's participation in FDE.
Methodology	There is a lack of epistemological and methodological diversity in FDE studies, which urges the need to conduct future studies using different methods, including a mixed-method approach (McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison, 2019; Eliakis *et al.*, 2020; Alhajri and Aloud, 2023).	The present study utilised the sequential mixed-method approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship.
Context	It is needed to conduct more studies exploring the liberating potential of FDE by paying attention to the contextual conditions (Welter, 2011; Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2015; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Wadhwani *et al.*, 2020; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). Previous literature on digital entrepreneurship and FDE is mainly confined to Europe and North America (Dy, Marlow, and Martin, 2017a; Nambisan, Wright, and	To answer these calls about paying attention to the context, the present study was conducted in Sri Lanka, an economically challenged, developing South Asian country which is grappling with strong patriarchal gender norms.

	Feldman, 2019; Luo and Chan, 2021; Best, Lassalle and Nicolopoulou, 2025; Kelly and McAdam, 2025). Studies should go beyond how the context impacts female entrepreneurship and focus on how female entrepreneurs can impact their context (Welter, 2020).	Furthermore, the study provides insights into two-way interaction, showcasing how women's engagement in FDE is influenced by the context and how FDE helps to shape contextual conditions.
Practice	Attaining a nuanced understanding of the broad range of factors that are influencing women's participation in the IS field is imperative to make more informed and concrete policy interventions (Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; Trauth and Connolly, 2021; Leong *et al.*, 2022).	The findings of the present study provide more contextually sensitive insights to policymakers regarding how to proliferate FDE despite the double-gender barrier.

9.5 Implications for Practice

The study's findings provide actionable insights for practice, which can benefit policymakers, female digital entrepreneurs, and non-state sector bodies. Accordingly, the following suggestions can be made, taking into account the specific concerns in the Sri Lankan context. When implementing the recommendations discussed below, an integrated and inclusive approach should be used to create a conducive environment that unleashes the full potential of FDE. A table that shows the interlinkage between key findings and recommendations is included in Appendix Q.

I. Positive Changes to the Formal Education System

One of the primary reasons why Sri Lanka is unable to unleash the full potential of FDE is the presence of loopholes in the prevailing educational policies. It is noteworthy that the Sri Lankan education system has not been updated to meet the demands of the modern market. In fact, the outdated education system has become a more serious obstacle to reaping the benefits of FDE than issues related to gender disparity or access to education. According to Adikaram and Razik (2023), in Sri Lanka, both men and women enjoy equal educational opportunities, with a higher percentage of female graduates from national universities in the STEM field. This shows that the problem lies in the quality of educational content.

A major drawback in the national education system is the insufficient emphasis on improving IT skills, English language development, and entrepreneurial skills development, which are critical to fostering a digital entrepreneurial mindset among women. ICT education in the country, for instance, does not meet the contemporary needs of the industry. Furthermore, compared to urban areas, inadequate IT education is more detrimental in the rural context, as it widens the digital divide prevalent in the country. The findings of the present study also reveal that substandard ICT education can have cascading negative impacts on the development of digital entrepreneurs, and hence, it is imperative to make efforts to prioritise ICT education in Sri Lanka. Additionally, the formal education system should prioritise enhancing English language proficiency among students, as English is the primary medium for interacting with digital

technologies. Moreover, the Sri Lankan education system remains shaped by the post-colonial neoliberal ethos, and it is more inclined to generate job seekers than to produce job creators (Liyanage, 2013). As an initial step to uplift the education system, entrepreneurship should be integrated into the school syllabus. This has great potential to inculcate entrepreneurial thinking in individuals from a very young age and build awareness about the significant role of entrepreneurship. Rather than introducing it as another book-based subject, initiatives should be taken to give more practical exposure related to the basic concepts of entrepreneurship. However, it should be noted that while these drawbacks in the education system affect both men and women, women face more disadvantages than their male counterparts because IT and entrepreneurship are considered as fields belonging to men in this patriarchal society.

Another major drawback is that the prevailing education system in Sri Lanka tends to uphold gender conventions, which is disadvantageous for improving FDE. For example, when looking at the national school syllabus, it is evident that the content of the syllabus is also developed in a manner that reinforces patriarchy. Therefore, it is worthwhile to conduct educational reforms to change the school syllabus to dismantle rather than reinforce the widely accepted gendered identities in society. For example, when teaching the roles of family members to Grade 1 students, household activities such as cooking, caring for children, and washing clothes are predominantly depicted as the primary responsibility of mothers (Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka, 2017). A sample page from the Grade 1 textbook developed based on the local syllabus is given in Appendix R. Such teachings will perpetuate patriarchal norms by reinforcing traditional gender roles. To bring gender parity into the broader society, it is essential to avoid instilling such gendered roles in the minds of children during the formative years of their lives. Instead, they should be taught that fathers are equally competent in the roles of caregiver and homemaker. A woman's identity as primarily a wife, mother, and caretaker will probably not change until society accepts that it is normal for men also to be the primary caretaker and homemaker of a family (Rugina and Ahl, 2024, p. 283). In conclusion, the education system should be reformed to create a more conducive environment for FDE.

II. Giving More Visibility to Female Digital Entrepreneurs

As Sri Lankan women's career choices are heavily influenced by societal perceptions and cultural norms related to various professions, it is imperative to reinforce women's participation in digital businesses to create a desirable image of FDE in society. In the Sri Lankan culture, entrepreneurship is perceived as a low-status career (Ranasinghe, 2008; Lin *et al.*, 2013). This status issue is even more detrimental when it comes to digital entrepreneurs due to the lack of visibility and employment identity inherent to digital business ownership (Wang and Keane, 2020; Kelly and McAdam, 2022, 2025). Therefore, to legitimise FDE as a viable career path, initiatives should be taken to enhance its occupational prestige. To improve the public image of FDE, the government should collaborate with other apex bodies and organise awareness programmes, award ceremonies, and appreciation events specifically targeting female digital entrepreneurs. The study's findings show that, although such initiatives are currently underway, they are relatively small in scale and highly fragmented, which dilutes the impact that can be achieved through these programs. Thus, it is imperative to ensure that mass-scale programmes are organised with central support from the government to celebrate the women who have successfully navigated this male-dominant sector. Such large-scale programmes will give more visibility to digital entrepreneurship as a career pathway for women and provide a morale boost for other women to step into this field.

III. Giving More Publicity and Awareness about the Programmes Available for Female Digital Entrepreneurs

While many noteworthy initiatives, such as training programmes, award ceremonies, and networking events, have already been launched by the government and other non-governmental organisations to boost FDE, criticism also exists about the effectiveness of spreading awareness about such programs. Respondents of the present study emphasised that they were not sufficiently aware of the training programmes, award ceremonies, and various initiatives by the government and other organisations. This issue was highlighted by one of the previous studies conducted by Adikaram and Razik (2023), who discovered that STEM entrepreneurs were largely unaware of most government initiatives aimed at inspiring women in STEM entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the respondents emphasised the possible selection biases when choosing participants for these programmes. This indicates a gulf between the initiatives taken to enhance digital entrepreneurship

and the awareness about the initiatives, which needs to be bridged. To overcome this problem, government agencies can partner with mass media to create awareness of these programmes. As the potential audience for these programmes is highly active on social networking sites, it is imperative to conduct effective social media campaigns with the support of influencers to create more awareness. Moreover, publishing these events online in women's empowerment communities will also be effective.

IV. Highlight Familial Male Allies as Role Models

The findings of this research emphasise the importance of highlighting male allies as role models for others. The respondents highly appreciated the significant role fathers and husbands played in helping them build careers in traditionally male-dominated fields. As these influential males were recognised as a critical reinforcing factor for women's participation in FDE in male-dominant patriarchal societies, it is imperative to highlight these men and give them more visibility in social spheres such as media, social platforms, and community events as admirable role models. Spotlighting these supportive men will guide and inspire other men in society, thereby reshaping the deeply rooted conventional gender norms. Similar to celebrating successful female digital entrepreneurs, initiatives should also be taken to share the stories of the male family members who believed in these women and proactively supported them in their entrepreneurial journeys. For example, specific segments can be introduced in award ceremonies targeting female digital entrepreneurs to appreciate and honour their male allies. Celebrating these men will be immensely important because, until the point that men (the powerful segment in society) embrace and support the change, the suppression experienced by women will persist.

V. Addressing the Bureaucracies Related to Business Registration and State Sector Support

While bureaucratic procedures have a detrimental impact on digital businesses in general, these effects are more severe for women-owned enterprises, as bureaucracy may exacerbate the challenges already faced by women. Therefore, the pivotal role of policy amendments and initiatives by the government to overcome state sector inefficiencies is recognised as crucial to developing an entrepreneurial culture (Madawala, Foroudi and Palazzo, 2023). For instance, the

business registration process for sole proprietorship businesses requires visits to the divisional secretariat and grama niladhari (village officer) office several times. In comparison to men, this may be more difficult for women due to their household chores and motherhood responsibilities as well as restrictive practices related to commuting. The government, therefore, should take initiatives to streamline the processes related to business registrations, approvals, and obtaining information. One possible solution is to introduce digital platforms for registering sole proprietorship businesses with digital verification and approval processes. As full automation of the processes can be time-consuming in the short run, initiatives can be taken to integrate authorities, providing a one-stop solution by curtailing bureaucracies. Furthermore, efforts should be taken to raise awareness among women about the simplified processes. This can be achieved through social media and by establishing dedicated hotlines for obtaining information about digital businesses. Developing area-based digital entrepreneurial hubs and information counters could also contribute to the streamlined dissemination of information. Conducting training programmes and awareness campaigns for state sector officials related to digital businesses is necessary, as the findings of this study have highlighted the inefficiencies and lack of professionalism among state sector employees. Since women who venture into digital businesses often face an uphill climb, they require adequate support from the government to streamline their journey.

VI. Establishment of a Support System for Childcare

Despite the increasing participation of women in the workforce, one of the biggest challenges they face is related to childcare. Due to the cultural norms and the unavailability of quality childcare centres in Sri Lanka, young mothers primarily rely on their parents to care for their children, which is unsustainable (Kodagoda, 2014). On top of the general challenges of this untenable model, female digital entrepreneurs find it difficult to convince their parents or extended families about the need for childcare support, as there is a lack of understanding about FDE. As these women work from home, families have a misconception that they do not require support for childcare, and as a result, they are compelled to multitask as they try to juggle childcare and business responsibilities. Therefore, to ensure women have sufficient time and energy to focus on an entrepreneurial venture, a robust support system for childcare is imperative.

Moreover, it is imperative to establish high-quality daycare facilities that provide reliable services. The importance of the state's trustworthy supply of childcare and state-of-the-art facilities for their children was also highlighted in previous studies (Kodagoda, 2014). The government can also take initiatives to monitor the quality of daycare facilities, ensuring they provide dependable service through qualified officials. Furthermore, daycare facilities should design tailor-made programmes to cater to the needs of digital entrepreneurial mothers. For instance, unlike a working mother with five days of regular work commitment, these digital entrepreneurial mothers may not require regular five-day programmes. Rather than that, they may require flexible programmes. Thus, customised options such as part-time care facilities or drop-in facilities should be arranged to cater to the unique needs of female digital entrepreneurs.

VII. Promoting Women Entrepreneurs in High-Growth, High-Profit Sectors

The present study also recognised that women who sell products through digital platforms were mainly confined to female-dominant markets, which are highly overcrowded and competitive with low profit margins. To solve the grassroot-level problem of women entrepreneurs being concentrated in the competitive low-growth sectors, initiatives like incorporating entrepreneurship into the formal education system can be taken. Even though women's engagement in non-traditional STEM education is high in the country (Adikaram and Razik, 2023), they have not been given sufficient knowledge and awareness about using their STEM expertise to start businesses which have higher profit margins and growth potential in these fields. Therefore, initiatives should be taken to reform education and introduce entrepreneurial education to all the fields, including STEM, as it will enable women to utilise their capital in more promising areas than confining their businesses to the conventional sectors. Inviting female digital entrepreneurs from non-conventional industries as university guest lecturers and getting them to conduct networking sessions could inspire young girls to pursue digital businesses in groundbreaking fields. In fact, female digital entrepreneurs should be used as influencers, and initiatives should be taken to raise awareness about non-conventional market opportunities available to potential female digital entrepreneurs through social networking sites. In addition, local authorities should develop specialised training programmes for school leavers focusing on advanced business and technological skills for high-growth sectors. Moreover, the state sector should collaborate with

financial institutions and provide financial support specifically targeting female entrepreneurs interested in entering high-profit industries.

9.6 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Like any empirical research study, this study also has its limitations. Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations, many of which pave the way for noteworthy avenues for future research. In this section, the researcher aims to highlight the study's limitations and outline the way forward to ensure the study's credibility, determine the extent to which its outcomes are useful, and guide future research.

The first limitation is related to sampling and sample size. The data for the study were collected using convenience and snowball sampling methods due to the scarcity of female digital entrepreneurs and the unavailability of a reliable sampling frame. These techniques could raise concerns about the biases in the sample, which may affect the reliability of the results and the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, due to the scarcity of female digital entrepreneurs and individuals' reluctance to participate in surveys, the researcher had to rely on a relatively small sample size (159 respondents) for the quantitative study, which limited the study's generalisability. Although the literature emphasised that a larger dataset is required for a complex conceptual framework with numerous variables, finding more than 159 respondents proved challenging due to the scarcity of female digital entrepreneurs and their reluctance to participate in the research. Although these issues were insufficient to hinder the overall effectiveness of the study, it is recommended that future studies be conducted with larger samples selected using probability sampling techniques to attain more reliable and generalisable findings.

Since previous literature advocated the use of a broader range of digital ventures to attain a more comprehensive understanding of the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship (Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017a; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Bui and Duong, 2024), this study used a wide array of female digital entrepreneurs who founded various digital technology-based businesses. Due to this very reason, it was not feasible to explore extensively the unique experiences and challenges faced by female digital entrepreneurs from each category.

Hence, exploring how liberation efforts of high, medium, and low female digital entrepreneurs could differ from each other was beyond the scope of the present study. However, it is essential for future research to investigate how the meritocracy offered by digital entrepreneurship varies among female entrepreneurs who belong to different categories of digitalisation, i.e., high, medium, and low.

Although quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in this study to investigate the factors that drive women to participate in FDE, the researcher relied primarily on the qualitative study to examine the social change activated through FDE. This initiative was taken from one end to ensure parsimony in survey design, which was imperative for achieving a reasonable response rate. Furthermore, the findings derived from the in-depth interviews provided a deeper understanding of the phenomenon's complexities and nuances. While the qualitative approach offers more profound insights into changes in social order resulting from women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship, future studies could focus on incorporating quantitative studies as it paves the way to generalising the findings to a broader audience. Quantitative studies about the activated social changes are also imperative to attain more robust knowledge which contributes to the evolution of FDE as a discipline.

Moreover, the present study was cross-sectional, which made it difficult to track how the temporal context impacts women's navigation through digital spaces. When taking the factors that reinforce FDE, it is evident that certain variables have evolved. However, a more comprehensive understanding would be possible if future research could investigate how this evolution has influenced women's participation in digital entrepreneurship. Further, changing social order via the pursuit of FDE involves shattering deeply ingrained norms. This process cannot be explored by one research. Since it is a long process, it should be explored over time. Additionally, cross-sectional studies do not provide sufficient evidence regarding the temporal effects on the entire process of women's emancipation. Therefore, future studies could incorporate the longitudinal approach to explore what drives women to disrupt the status quo and engage in digital entrepreneurship, and how the social order changes over time. Hence, it is imperative to conduct longitudinal studies to attain a better understanding of women's engagement in digital

entrepreneurship (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2019; Suseno and Abbott, 2021; Chakraborty & Biswal, 2023; Wiig, Schou and Hansen, 2023).

This study collected data from female digital entrepreneurs, with the findings primarily derived from their perspectives. In the future, if researchers conduct more studies that consider the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, it will be possible to attain a broader and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison (2019) also emphasised the importance of conducting future studies on FDE as a multi-level analysis, as it enables one to better understand the interrelated linkage between gender and context. Thus, in the future, researchers can go beyond the perspectives of female digital entrepreneurs by collecting data from family members or individuals from government agencies to gain a more holistic understanding of the problem.

The present study can be considered one of the first attempts to attain a more comprehensive understanding of digital entrepreneurship as a liberating pathway, examining both the factors that drive women to engage in digital entrepreneurship and the social changes that it activates. This study addresses the call by Ughetto *et al.* (2020) to conduct more studies on the transformational potential offered by digital entrepreneurship for women, paying greater attention to the diverse contextual conditions. It also responds to the call by Welter (2020) to go beyond contextualising gender and focus on gendering the context. While this study offers valuable insights into the field, it is essential to conduct further studies to deepen our understanding of the area. Thus, future researchers can build on this initial work to enhance the robustness of the findings and gather further insights to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship as a context-bound phenomenon.

Even though the study afforded some attention to intersectionality, an area that has received limited academic attention (Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017a; McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020; Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Benali and Villesèche, 2024), more research is required to explore the intersectionality in relation to FDE. Therefore, in the future, more research should be undertaken to explore how different social ascriptions intersect with gender and influence the liberation potential of digital entrepreneurship in emerging economies. For this, scholars need to

acknowledge the complexity of intersectionality in the real-life context, because in reality, multiple social ascriptions interact simultaneously. Hence, it would be beneficial to study the multiplicity of social states and their impact on FDE.

An unexpected yet interesting finding that emerged from the study is the reluctance of some accomplished female digital entrepreneurs to act as role models for other women, as they perceive the success of other women in the field as a threat to their own standing. It signals the presence of "queen bees", which needs to be explored further. Faniko *et al*. (2021) have also emphasised that conventionally male-dominant sectors create conducive conditions for the emergence of queen bees. In disadvantaged conditions, women can work collectively for their development or focus on advancing as individuals rather than exploring a collective solution. However, these individualised solution-seeking processes result in distancing oneself from others who are in the same disadvantaged conditions (Grangeiro and Neto, 2023), and they may not be happy to share their hard-earned status as female digital entrepreneurs with others. Therefore, future researchers could conduct studies on the emergence of queen bees with a specific focus on the factors contributing to the creation of queen bees and the impact of having queen bees on the legitimisation of female digital entrepreneurs. Evidently, FDE is a novel area that has received limited academic attention thus far. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct further studies to explore women's experiences in creating and managing digital businesses and gain a deeper, more holistic understanding of the emancipatory potential of FDE.

Another limitation of this study is its focus on a single country's context. While the study provides valuable insights into the novel area of the emancipatory potential of FDE, it predominantly focusses on the experience of female digital entrepreneurs in a single country neglecting the importance of exploring experiences of female digital entrepreneurs in multiple countries. As the extant literature on this field remains new and inconclusive, attempting to resolve such debates through a single-country study inevitably raises concerns regarding external validity. However, it is noteworthy that even though the study findings cannot be generalised the study's findings may hold transferability to other emerging South Asian economies that share similar institutional structures, cultural norms, and regulatory environments. Future research could extend

this work by employing comparative or multi-country designs to explore whether the patterns observed here hold across different contexts.

When exploring the experiences of female digital entrepreneurs, this study did not account for the legal status of their businesses. The absence of a distinction between formally registered and unregistered enterprises represents a limitation, as it may influence the inferences drawn regarding formal versus informal entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs operating in these two sectors often encounter distinct challenges and opportunities, and their experiences may vary significantly. However, at present as female digital entrepreneurs represent a relatively rare group in the country, implementing such a distinction posed practical difficulties during this research. Nevertheless, future studies would benefit from examining the experiences of formally registered and informal entrepreneurs separately, as this could yield more nuanced and specific insights into the realities experienced by each segment.

Furthermore, as the study focusing only on female digital entrepreneurs who have sustained their businesses, while overlooking the experiences and challenges of those who discontinued their ventures, this study suffers from the limitation of survivor bias. In later studies if researcher can work on exploring the experiences of those individuals who closed their ventures would have enriched the analyses. In addition, including non-digital forms of entrepreneurship and examining their experiences in terms of emancipatory potential would have enabled a valuable comparative analysis. Such an approach could have provided deeper insights into how digital and non-digital entrepreneurial paths differ or align in empowering women, thereby enriching the overall understanding of female entrepreneurship.

In conclusion, it can be stated that, despite the inherent limitations of any research study, the present study makes a valuable contribution to the advancement of knowledge on the emancipatory potential of FDE, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the study has identified numerous promising avenues for future research in digital entrepreneurship. As digital technology plays a deeply embedded role in individuals' lives in the contemporary context, their social standing is also significantly influenced by their engagement with these digital technologies. Thus, female digital entrepreneurship is not only about women

leveraging digital technology and starting and running businesses to accomplish their economic wellbeing but also about changing women's position in broader society despite adversity.

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Appendix A: The Foremost Reasons for Defining Entrepreneurship Diversely

- The relative youngness of the discipline (Kobia & Sikalieh, 2010; Landström, 2020)
- The complexity and dynamic nature of the discipline (Hessels & Naudé, 2019; Leunbach, 2021; Low & Macmillan, 1988; Mokaya et al., 2012; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000).
- Everyday use of the term entrepreneurship also made it challenging to develop a scientific and commonly agreed definition for entrepreneurship (Hébert & Link, 1989; Landström, 2020).
- Lack of definitional consensus on entrepreneurship is owed to the concept's polysemic nature, which gives various meanings to different people in diverse contexts (Alvarez & Barney, 2007; Audretsch et al., 2015). For instance, Leunbach (2021) mentioned that entrepreneurs cover a broader picture, ranging from the boy who washes a neighbour's car to earn some pocket money to a research scientist involved in commercialising new medication for cancer.
- As a research discipline, entrepreneurship is a multidisciplinary field which got many contributions from other disciplines such as economics, management, psychology, sociology and anthropology with various ontological assumptions (Prince et al., 2021; Karayiannis, 2009; Urban, 2010; Landström, 2020; Prince et al., 2021). These disciplines have influenced respective scholars' definitions of entrepreneurship. For instance, from the perspective of economists, classical economics models evolving around the scarcity of resources were being used to define entrepreneurship; from the behaviourists' perspective, personalities and characteristics are used to arrive at definitions of entrepreneurship and those who defined entrepreneurship from the management aspect focused on the resourcefulness and organisation capabilities when defining entrepreneurship (Urban, 2010). Definitions inspired by different disciplines result in capturing different aspects of entrepreneurship based on core ontological assumptions related to the respective discipline rather than capturing the phenomenon holistically.

Appendix B: Entrepreneurship Definitions Before and After 1990

Before 1990		**After 1990**	
Source	**Definition**	**Source**	**Definition**
(Cantillon, 1755, cited in Landström, 2020; Cantillon, 1755, cited in Long, 1983; Cantillon, 1979, cited in Praag, 1999)	The process of earning profit by undertaking the risk associated with uncertainty.	(Praag, 1999)	Presenting and implementing new ideas regarding production processes, products, and markets results in customer satisfaction and venture creation.
(Smith, 1776, cited in Nagarajan, 2011)	Capitalists initiate businesses for commercial purposes.	(Shane and Venkatarama, 2000)	An individual effort is driven towards exploring, evaluating, and exploiting opportunities for profit maximisation.
(Say, 1847, cited in Cole, 1946; Say, 1847, cited in Long, 1983)	Skillful individuals apply their knowledge to utilise resources and develop products to be sold at a profit.	(Montanye, 2006)	A person who successfully does creations bearing the uncertainty and risk for which they get economic rents.
(Knight, 1921, cited in Casson and Casson, 2014; Knight, 1921, cited in Karayiannis, 2009; Knight, 1921,	Bearing the risk associated with adverse financial outcomes that can result from the failing of an enterprise.	(OECD, 2007)	Individuals explore and develop novel products, production methods or markets to create or enhance the value of economic activities.

cited in Landström, 2020)			
(Marshall,1887, cited in Casson and Casson, 2014; Marshall,1887, cited in Karayiannis, 2009; Marshall,1887, cited in Landström, 2020)	Coordinating and arranging production functions using the least cost method to optimise profit. Entrepreneurs greatly appreciate financial freedom and independence.	(Klein, 2008)	An individual who has imaginations about the future and utilises resources based on these imaginations to obtain profit.
(Schumpeter, 1934, cited in Hébert and Link, 1989; Schumpeter, 1934, cited in Nagarajan, 2011; Schumpeter, 1934, cited in Landström, 2020)	An individual's effort is driven towards challenging the existing market equilibrium by introducing innovations.	(Mokaya *et al*., 2012)	An individual with the enthusiasm and motivation to initiate and continue a profit-seeking business venture.
(Cole, 1946)	A series of activities undertaken by individuals or groups to initiate, sustain, and enrich a business organisation that produces goods and services to maximise profit.	(Bosma, 2013)	Efforts exerted by an individual or a group of people towards the creation of a new business ranging from self-employment, initiating a completely new venture, or expanding a business that already exists.
(Mises, 1949	Making effective decisions to utilise the	(Casson and Casson, 2014)	Someone who engages in accepting and structuring

cited in Landström, 2020; Mises, 1949 cited in Montanye, 2006)	production factors for specific purposes, which enables earning a profit.		risks involved in business ventures to gain profit.
(Mclelland,1961)	An effort made by an individual with a higher need for achievement to utilise the opportunities through which they receive a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.	(Prince *et al.,* 2021)	The process of exploiting opportunities through developing novel ideas, developing an offering, and validating its appropriateness to the target market, which involves innovation and risk-taking.
(Baumol, 1968)	The recombination of production factors to enhance personal wealth and prestige where ultimate economic performance depends on whether the resources are allocated to productive initiatives or vice versa.	(Alvarez and Barney, 2007)	Exploring or creating opportunities by making contextually applicable decisions.
(Collins and Moore, 1970, cited in Gartner,1995)	Individuals' longing for independence that drives them to engage in self-employment rather than working under someone. Entrepreneurs engage in producing new combinations.	(Bruyat and Julien, 2001)	The process of initiating, developing, and influencing the environment through creating new values by an individual within an environment with particular characteristics.

(Wilken,1979)	A set of psychological traits an individual holds, including creativity, courage to take risks and deal with uncertainties, and assertiveness, which drives them to produce new combinations.	(Hessels and Naudé, 2019)	Competent and independent individuals' efforts are driven towards resources, processing, and way of living through which they try to seize beneficial opportunities in the marketplace to generate or enhance value for individuals or society.
(Schultz, 1975)	An individual with the ability to deal with disequilibrium in market or non-market activities can be considered an entrepreneur. The individual's education will enhance these abilities.		
(Kirzner, 1973 cited in Kirzner, 2008; Kirzner, 1973 cited in Klein, 2008)	A person who alertly searches for profit-making opportunities to bring in market equilibrium.		

Appendix C: Identifying Common Themes Based on a Critical Review of Entrepreneurship Definitions

Contemporary researchers appreciate the importance of the behavioural perspective in the study of entrepreneurship (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Hedner, Abouzeedan and Klofsten, 2011; Audretsch, 2012; Prince, Chapman and Cassey, 2021). Therefore, when reviewing entrepreneurship definitions to identify key themes, it is fruitful to draw the themes that reflect the behaviours of entrepreneurs. The behavioural approach of entrepreneurship supports explaining the phenomenon of entrepreneurship from the perspective of what entrepreneurs do and their actions rather than emphasising who an entrepreneur is (Gartner, 1988). In most well-established definitions proposed by prominent authors, different functions performed by entrepreneurs are captured. Hence, the researcher identified those key functions as key themes.

Most definitions of entrepreneurship have the term opportunities as an essential term. Some definitions recognise *discovering and seizing opportunities* as a significant function of entrepreneurship (McClelland, 1961; Kirzner, 2008; Salerno, 2008; Hessels and Naudé, 2019; Prince, Chapman and Cassey, 2021), while others recognise the *creation of opportunities* as a pivotal function performed by entrepreneurs (Sarasvathy, 2001; Alvarez and Barney, 2007). For instance, Kobia and Sikalieh (2010) claim that the success of an entrepreneurial initiative depends on three main factors, namely opportunity, individual, and environment. Similarly, Shane and Venkataraman (2000) emphasised that entrepreneurship is a combination of rewarding opportunities and adventurous individuals. Thus, the existing literature substantiates that even an individual with a range of traits inherent to an entrepreneur will not thrive if they cannot create or seize opportunities by utilising their skills. However, every entrepreneurship opportunity comes with a unique set of risks. Therefore, *risk-taking* is often discussed as the most critical function performed by an entrepreneur. Except for Schumpeter, other scholars identified risk-taking as a pivotal function of entrepreneurship (Baumol, 1968; Praag, 1999). In a world filled with uncertainties and imperfect information, committing resources to a venture has an inherent risk. Thus, it is axiomatic that engaging in any entrepreneurial initiative involves facing higher levels of ambiguity and chances of failure (Wannamakok and Chang, 2020). On the other hand, risks are compensated by profit, which is the ultimate economic reward for entrepreneurs. Therefore, *profit*

maximisation has been identified as a critical function. At the inception of the concept of entrepreneurship, where entrepreneurs were identified as intermediaries, profit was discussed as a key motive (Praag, 1999; Kirzner, 2008).

Further, *innovation* is another critical theme highlighted in many definitions of entrepreneurship (Gartner, 1995; Stewart *et al.*, 2003; Casson and Casson, 2014; Prince, Chapman and Cassey, 2021). Researchers often emphasise the central role of innovation and new value creation in entrepreneurship, pointing out that innovation is the function that distinguishes entrepreneurship from other disciplines (Stewart *et al*., 2003). Indicating the crucial role of innovation in entrepreneurship, many authors use a wide array of terms equivalent to innovation. Some of them are new venture creation, disruptive innovation, novel business methods and models, and new product development (Mokaya, Namusonge and Sikalieh, 2012).

Most of the contemporary definitions of entrepreneurship emphasise the functions of *customer satisfaction and providing social well-being* (Praag, 1999; Bruyat and Julien, 2001). Even though the early literature overlooked the role of entrepreneurs as agents who are committed to uplifting the well-being of society (Praag, 1999), in today's context, entrepreneurship is praised for alleviating poverty through the generation of jobs and enhancing social inclusivity (Kobia and Sikalieh, 2010; Rijkers *et al.*, 2014). Thus, *social well-being* plays an indispensable role in the discourse on contemporary entrepreneurship.

As evidenced by the above discussion, although entrepreneurship has not yet gained definitional consensus, some key themes, namely *risk-taking, creating or seizing opportunities, satisfying customers, profit maximisation, and adding value to society,* have been identified in the available definitions. Therefore, rather than proposing another definition, considering the key characteristics and functions identified by scholars would be more effective for determining the scope of entrepreneurship. Since the field of entrepreneurship already has a wide array of definitions proposed by different authors, adding one more definition to the list will not create any additional value (Bruyat and Julien, 2001). Hence, for the purpose of this study, the researcher will use the definition proposed by Prince *et al*. (2021, p. 29), "the act of generating and developing an idea for validation". Dissecting the definition, Prince *et al.* (2021) emphasise that this definition

recognises entrepreneurship as an act which involves exploiting opportunities by coming up with novel ideas, developing an offering, and validating its appropriateness to the target market, which requires innovation and risk-taking. As Bruyat and Julien (2001, p. 165) state, “we will not understand the phenomenon of entrepreneurship if we do not consider the individual (the entrepreneur), the project, the environment and also the links between them over time”. It is evident that the definition proposed by Prince *et al.* (2021) takes a more holistic and constructive approach, which captures the integration of the individual, the project, and the external environment.

Appendix D: Masculine and Feminine Characteristics

Masculine and Feminine Characteristics

Masculine Characteristics	**Feminine Characteristics**
Agentic	Communal
Self-reliant	Nurturing
Assertive	Agreeable
Competitive	Collaborative
Influencing	Adjusting
Confident	Modest
Analytical	Holistic
Brilliant	Warm
decisive	Restrained
Independent	Interdependent
Individual	Relational
Self-promotional	Other-promotional
Risk taker	Patient
Separate	Connected
Leader	Follower
Context Independent	Context Dependent

Source: Cheryan & Marcus, 2020, p. 1025

Appendix E: Portrayal of Entrepreneurship as a Masculine Discourse

Patriarchal Ideology

At the inception patriarchal ideology in the society has favored man with masculine identity to be the dominant player in the family but later it has been used to explain the orderly arranged supremacy of male which inevitably result in subordination of female (Franklin et al., 1991). Thus, patriarchy resulted in placing men in more dominant position and subordination of the women which enable men to exert power over women in different social contexts (Bruni et al., 2004; Connell as cited in Paechter, 2018). Business organizations are being parts of the larger society engage in reproducing and fostering these patriarchal norms (Acker, 1990; Laguía et al., 2019) which results in male domination in business context. Business organizations are being identified as man-made entities controlled by men who are perceived as ideal candidates for higher order leadership positions. In addition, from the inception of the entity "business organization" gendered division of labor was quite apparent. This practice has subsequently influenced the creation of prominent norms related to corporate culture and organizational structures (Mastracci & Arreola, 2016). Based on the gendered division of labor, men were always framed as ideal candidates for upper echelons of the business organizations , decision making roles and skilled work, while women were positioned as an unskilled segment who could survive with lower-level jobs (Acker, 1990; Bishu & Headley, 2020; Laguía et al., 2019; Mastracci & Arreola, 2016). Due to the intertwined nature of entrepreneurship and corporate leadership (Bruni et al., 2004; R. Harrison et al., 2015; Lombardi et al., 2020) entrepreneurial initiatives are also being emulated as business leadership positions where men are identified as the ideal image that fits an entrepreneur's role.

Formal Education Sector Dominated by Men

In ancient times education was identified as a privilege to be experienced by men, which excluded women from the formal education system. Like in many other industries, this has resulted in male domination in university education. According to Acker & Feuerverger (1996), even though women are identified as ideal prospects for teaching jobs which are considered as 'caring professions'; they were estranged or considered secondary in academia, where they are expected to perform more teaching and student advisory roles and allocate limited time on research activities. As conducting research is at the pinnacle of the university context, traditionally, more men taking part in research work results in male dominance in the scholarly community. Marlow & Martinez Dy (2018) emphasized that, in general, the research field is one such arena that is

developed by men to explore men in order to develop knowledge for men. Entrepreneurship as an academic discipline cannot be an exception to this general standard where males dominate the field. This can also be considered a reason for the existence of male defaults which involve considering male biasness as normal, neutral, or standard (Lewis, 2006; Mastracci & Arreola, 2016; Whitehead, 2001). As male ideologies dominate the scholarly community, the early literature on entrepreneurship was automatically perceived from the masculine lens as researchers were not sensitive to sense things from a gendered perspective.

Entrepreneurship as an Academic Discipline Shaped by the Thoughts of Masculine National Cultures

Based on Hofstede's six dimensions of national cultures, some countries have identified as having masculine cultures that favor clear demarcation of gender roles, expect individuals to be assertive and ambitious, and heavily accept male dominance in social settings (Hofstede, 2011). Realizing the intersectionality among Hofetsade's cultural dimensions, it has been noted that masculinity goes together with high individualism and low uncertainty avoidance(Hayton et al., 2002), which are pivotal for the success of new business venture initiation. As masculine cultures favor ambitious, assertive, individualized, and risk-taking behaviors, they may use all male characterization to recognize significant economic activities ranging from production and distribution to new venture creation. When reviewing the extant literature, it is evident that the foremost contributing nations, such as German, Austria, the UK, and the USA, which helped towards the conceptualization of entrepreneurship as a specific field, have masculine cultures (Minkov & Hofstede, 2014). As these foundational texts play a pivotal role in shaping a particular discourse (Ahl, 2006) while appreciating the contribution made by these countries toward making entrepreneurship a distinct academic discipline, it should be noted that their influence may have affected the persistence of the stereotype of entrepreneurship as a masculine discourse.

Presumption of Gender-Neutral Business Organizations

The presumption of gender-neutral business organizations and entrepreneurship fields can be considered another critical factor that strengthens the male identity of entrepreneurial businesses (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Brush & Cooper, 2012; Lewis, 2006; Cheryan & Marcus, 2020; Bishu & Headley, 2020). Based on Acker (1990), it is challenging to see the gendered nature of the organization when all masculine characterization is there. This results in perceiving masculine business organizations as a gender-neutral arena that provides meritocratic space for anyone with

the willingness and capacity to be an entrepreneur. Such falsified perception will not only result in concealing the masculine biasness of the entrepreneurial field but also results in disguising women's involvement in the field (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Laguía et al., 2019; Lewis, 2006). Therefore, it is worthwhile to revisit the great mistake that had been committed over the years by perceiving all male-characterized entrepreneurship as a gender-neutral phenomenon.

Appendix F: Criticisms Against Female Underperformance Hypotheses

Female underperformance hypotheses being taken for granted, it is evident that uncritically espousing the preconception of female entrepreneurs as deficient will result in strengthening the barriers for female entrepreneurs by reproducing conventional gender norms (Dean et al., 2019; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). A reviewing of the past literature helps to illustrate how the underperformance and women are being juxtaposed towards portraying the ideology that women's businesses are depriving and how it has been fueled irrationally without exploring in-depth the foundation and validity of such conception. Firstly, it is imperative to explore whether the female entrepreneurial initiatives are really underperforming than the male-initiated businesses or if it is because of the general conception of women as secondary to their businesses being recognized as underperforming. Further, women are perceived as "others" in the business context; than victimizing women for underperforming initiatives, it is critical to explore whether their surroundings of them have given them a conducive atmosphere to unleash their full potential as entrepreneurs. Fixing women will not bring positive rays of hope to female entrepreneurship as there are many structural circumstances that affect constructing women entrepreneurs' deficiency. Without addressing the structural context taking initiatives to fix the outcome of such a broken structure will only worsen the problem as underlying causes of the problems persist without proper treatment. In addition, to get a more critical understanding of the presupposition of deficient women entrepreneurs, it would be imperative to explore the appropriateness of measures being used to measure their performance.

1. *Lack of Empirical Support to Prove "Female Underperformance Hypotheses."*

According to the conventional economic performance indicators, in certain instances, women-owned businesses are identified as underperforming entities than their male counterparts (Elam et al., 2021; Bardasi et al., 2011; Du & Henrekson, 2000; Fischer et al., 1993; Ladge et al., 2019; Vossenberg, 2013). However, when reviewing the literature, it is evident that unlike in other positivist research where hypotheses are accepted or rejected by rigorous testing, acceptance of the underperformance hypotheses is not being done after rigorous testing (Dean et al., 2019). In most situations, it is clear that aligning with the conventional stereotypical beliefs which lead to the marginalization of women and the formation of discriminatory trajectories, the deficiency of

women's entrepreneurial businesses has also been considered as a taken-for-granted assumption. Constant efforts to associate femininity with weakness, anxiety, risk avoidance nature, and poor business insight naturally result in the formation of the idealogy of female business initiatives are thrashed (Ahl & Marlow, 2012). Marlow & McAdam (2013) emphasized that "*we not only expect women to be different from men, we also expect that which is associated with them to be deficient*" (p 119). Despite the fact that the gender of the owner, small businesses tend to showcase a "lifestyle" profile where owners tend to prefer to remain as small with low growth intention (Ahl, 2004). Further, these businesses tend to showcase vulnerabilities to external market shocks more than large corporations, which results in high churn rates. Therefore, it is evident that low or slow growth is not something specific to the gender of small business owners but it is something inherent to small businesses(Marlow & McAdam, 2013).

Adding on statistical figures obtained from data bases and other reports comparing female and male-female entrepreneurial initiatives have also been used as the base for underperformance hypotheses which cannot be considered reliable due to the issues such as outdatedness, calculate for some other purposes, limited sample sizes and inability to portray complexities in economic behavior (Du & Henrekson, 2000; Waring and Steinem as cited in Dean et al., 2019). Henceforth, it can be argued that underperformance hypotheses are more of a taken-for-granted assumption than a tested ideology with academic rigor.

Even in the instances where female underperformance hypotheses have been meticulously tested while considering the structural factors, it doesn't seem to be supported well (Ahl, 2004, 2006; Du & Henrekson, 2000; Marlow & McAdam, 2013; Watson, 2003). In fact, there were empirical studies that have challenged the norm of underperformance hypotheses were the findings of those studies sometimes revealed that women-owned businesses outer perform their male counterparts. According to an empirical study done in the Australian context related to female-owned new ventures, it was found that female-owned business ventures are not deprived of any underperformance in terms of closure rates, return on assets, and risk-taking perspectives (Zolin & Watson, 2013). Similarly, Ahl highlighted many instances in which empirical studies did not provide strong evidence of the deprived performance of female entrepreneurs than their counterparts (Kalleberg & Leicht, Fasci & Valdez, Chell & Baines, Anna et al., as cited in Ahl, 2004). With more positive vibes Watson (2003) also found that in certain instances, women-owned businesses have a slightly higher level of performance than their counterparts. According to a

systematic literature review conducted by Dean et al. (2019), in those studies which have compared female entrepreneurial businesses with male businesses, both used to perform on par with each other in many aspects, while differences were marked only related to very few measures. When reviewing the findings of these empirical studies, it is apparent that differences between male and female entrepreneurial performance are not as bad as how those were portrayed. For instance, when reviewing the above Table 06 also, it is evident that even though the women entrepreneurs are lagging behind when compared to the male entrepreneur's gap between the two segments in terms of many indicators are quite thin. In spite of no clear evidence of a significant vacuum in female entrepreneurial business performance, emphasizing those few differences while ignoring many similarities has been highlighted in previous literature as well (Ahl, 2004, 2006; Dean et al., 2019) where Ahl (2006) called this as "*making a mountain out of a molehill*" (p. 8).

2. Misinterpret Constrained Performance as Underperformance

Rather than female-owned businesses underperforming, these businesses tend to perform in a constrained manner because of the way those businesses are being positioned in a socio-economic context (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). While male entrepreneurs outnumber female entrepreneurs in the business context, female entrepreneurial initiatives are mainly confined to the overcrowded and low-value-adding sectors (Ahl, 2004; Guzman & Kacperczyk, 2019; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). It was apparent that female businesses are mainly confined to the retail and service sectors, which can be considered the main reason for them to remain small with a lack of growth (Ahl, 2004). Due to the nature of the service sector, which requires low entry costs and human capital, women who are deprived of structural barriers tend to select this segment more than the other areas, which require more resources. In such overcrowded, highly competitive sectors, entrepreneurs tend to experience low-profit margins and low growth perspectives despite the owner's gender (Storey as cited in Marlow & McAdam, 2013; Ahl 2004). Rather than recognizing women's increased presence in the overcrowded sectors and blaming women for their confinement to these sectors, it is significant to explore why women make conscious decisions to enter these industries.

There is an array of structural barriers which provide lesser access to women in education, training, networking, and labor force participation, which results in them depriving of resources required to initiate high-growth businesses. When reviewing in depth, it is clear that stereotypical gender

norms result in the creation of expectations about the behavior of men and women where the normative behavior expected from men is most related to the role of breadwinner and women are to be a homemaker. Thus, the structural conditions and socio-cultural environment have also been made to create these stereotypical men and women where women get lesser opportunities to enhance the skills and attitudes required to be a primary income generator. Due to these deeply rooted gender stereotypes, which pave the way for discrimination, it is apparent to have more male business initiatives in high-growth sectors such as science, technology, engineering, and math while women are confined to the low-growth overcrowded segments (Marlow & McAdam, 2013).

3. Female Businesses as Secondary Income Sources

Based on the Ahl & Marlow (2021), one of the key normative assumptions that prevail in entrepreneurial research is work and family are two rival aspects based on the stereotypical gender women prioritize over family. This positioning will result in female entrepreneurs making a conscious decision either to be successful entrepreneurs at the cost of womanhood or be the nice woman at the cost of being an underperforming business owner. When exploring the nature of women-owned businesses, it is evident that most of these businesses are developed, accommodating sufficient time for the women to perform their nurturing duties (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). As a result, there are relatively ample cases where women undertake businesses on a part-time basis as a means of generating secondary income. It was especially noted that in emerging economies, women who are pushed by the socio-economic conditions to take up entrepreneurial initiatives tend to run businesses in a very informal manner with limited time commitments as a means of supporting families (Sajjad et al., 2020). Women who were expected to take the major share of household nurturing and caring responsibilities ended up being self-employed because of the necessity (as they have no other option) (Choi & Kim, 2021; Ryu & Kim, 2020) and they will be happier to remain as small business owners than fierce and competitive entrepreneurs with greater objectives to be the market leader, step into the international markets and creating word class brand image.

In the literature also, it is explicitly mentioned that to uplift women's success in the labor force, they should be provided with part-time opportunities, flexible hours, and extended leave without penalizing from the pay (Denhardt & Perkins, 2010), which implicitly convey the message that women's economic role should be secondary to her role as a primary caregiver in a family. There

were instances where recommendations were provided to encourage female entrepreneurial initiatives as more flexible income generation pathways which enable women to work around the schedules of their family commitments (Caputo & Dolinsky, 1998). Similarly, in a research study undertaken to explore the reasons female professionals give up on their jobs and starting own businesses, it was noted that factors such as work-life balance and flexibility are the foremost reasons (Choi & Kim, 2021). Adding on Ahl & Marlow (2012) emphasized in the case of study texts how motherhood and homemaking are framed as the foremost duty of a woman where entrepreneurial efforts are placed as an obligation that competes with motherhood.

In all these instances, entrepreneurship has been mainly discussed as an individualistic effort where entrepreneurs have the discretion to make choices on which sphere they will prioritize by giving minimal attention towards structural arrangements. Even in limited instances where structural arrangements were being discussed, it was being discussed as women needed to fix the gaps in the structural arrangements (Ahl, 2004). For instance, much extant literature provides recommendations for women to enhance their education, training, networks and corporate experiences to become effective entrepreneurs. (Asian Development Bank, 2018; GEM (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor), 2022; GEM, 2021; United Nations ESCAP, 2015). Individualistic interpretation aligns well with the postfeminist sensations also, where it is articulated that prioritizing the family is a conscious decision made by women by utilizing their freedom of choice. However, gender is not an independent discourse, and the socio-cultural norms have much of a say regarding how the genders are constructed (Ahl, 2006). In contrast, gender norms encourage allocating a considerable amount of time to engage in caring, nurturing and domestic responsibilities (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Asian Development Bank, 2018; Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Sundermeier et al., 2018; Ahl, 2004) which results in self-employed women to spend limited time and commitment on their business ventures (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). It is clear that deeply rooted gender stereotypes provide a psychological boost for women to prioritize their families, and they feel like incomplete women if they do not do so. This may result in women choosing business initiatives they can manage with the limited time and resources they have and then seeking lucrative opportunities with great market potential. Thus it is evident that more than the women's deficiency, it is the socio-cultural demands of the structure which results in placing women in a situation where she has to wear multiple hats at the same time and juggle between business and family, which limits her potential to compete at the same grounds of men (Ahl, 2006).

4. Gendered Performance Measures

Entrepreneurship being a male-gendered profession, it is apparent that conventional performance measures used to evaluate the success of entrepreneurial initiatives are based on masculine gender norms (Ahl & Marlow, 2012). Therefore, it is obvious that when evaluating a woman based on male-gendered measures, they will be in a disadvantaged position. Measuring the effectiveness of female entrepreneurs by using measures constructed on male entrepreneurs is more like evaluating whether women got what it takes to be male entrepreneurs (Ahl, 2004). Outcomes of such measures will not only place women entrepreneurs in a secondary position, but they may also result in creating psychological barriers for women regarding their own performance. Being skeptical towards the performance measures used to evaluate the effectiveness of female entrepreneurs, Buttner & Moore conducted a study to explore women's interpretation of success. The findings of the study substantiate that for women entrepreneurs, self-fulfilment and accomplishment of the goals come before profit and growth (Buttner & Moore as cited in Ahl, 2004).

Appendix G: Theoretical Models Used to Discuss Prejudice towards Women

Authors	Year	Name of the Theory	Description
Eagle & Wood	2012	Social Role Theory (SRT)	Based on the SRT, disparities and similarities related to the behaviour among men and women derive because of stereotypical beliefs ascribed to gender by the larger society. Stereotypical beliefs about gender roles will depend on the social perceivers' observations about men's and women's behaviour in day-to-day contexts (For instance, activities which are seen to be taken mostly by women will be considered women's jobs and vice-versa). Demarcation of these roles between males and females is deeply rooted to the unique biological structure of each segment (men had more upper body strength and much bigger body sizes-men which made them ideal candidates for activities such as farming, hunting animals etc. and women's bodies specifically made for gestation and nursing, they were being recognized as more suitable to take up nurturing and home front activities) This early division of labour results in recognizing men as effective labour force participants while confining women to the home front.
Foschi	2000	Double Standards for Competence	Double standards for competence emphasise using different requirements depending on status, such as gender, ethnic group, social class etc., to make inferences about the individual's competencies. For instance, when considering the status characteristic of gender, women will be evaluated by

			using more rigorous standards than men. They are expected to try harder and make a minimal number of mistakes than their male counterparts to consider those women as capable for a particular position. Applying such double standards results in making the pathway for women more demanding.
Heilman as cited in Heilman & Caleo	2018	Lack of Fit Model (1983)	The Lack of the Fit Model emphasizes that discriminatory practices toward women in the corporate context stem from the extent to which the attributes required by an organizational position contrast with the stereotypical attributes ascribed to gender. Stereotypical beliefs are held that women showcase more communal attributes and are deprived of masculine attributes expected from an organizational worker. This results in females being ill-fit as employees, which in turn generates negative expectations about their performance. Due to such speculations about negative performance expectations, women will be evaluated and judged unfavourable, and consequently, they will be disadvantaged in terms of organizational decisions.
Bandura	1978	Self-Efficacy Theory	The self-efficacy theory illustrates an individual's beliefs regarding his/her ability to perform activities necessary to attain goals. Based on the self-efficacy theory, an individual's choice of goal, willingness to exert effort to attain the goal, and persistence of the effort in difficult times depend on one's own judgement about his/her ability.

			With the deeply rooted stereotypical beliefs about gender, they tend to judge themselves as more competent to take up house core activities and less competent in workforce roles. As a result, women tend to take on fewer challenges and responsibilities in the workforce, which affects their career progression. The stagnation of career progression due to personal judgements of women releases negative signals to society about women's capacity to take up challenging higher-order positions.
Glick & Fiske	2001	Theory of Ambivalent Sexism (TAS)	Based on the TAS, social perceivers tend to designate positive insights on women who embrace stereotypical female attributes while abruptly rejecting women who do not fall into the stereotypical frame of a woman. TAS encompasses two forms of sexism, namely **hostile sexism,** which is showcasing hostility towards those women whose behaviours are inconsistent with the traditional female role and **benevolent sexism,** which is demonstrating affection and approval towards those women who are complying with traditional female roles. From the outset, it is only hostile sexism that indicates prejudice towards women, but when exploring deeper, it is clear that benevolence sexism also places women in a disadvantaged position in a subtle way. Approval and appreciation of women's engagement in stereotypical gender roles may work as an incentive for social perceivers to take up such traditional gender roles.

			This results in women to confine to the home front while marginalizing their involvement in the workforce, which ultimately results in perceiving women as an inappropriate candidate for the labour market. Thus, same as the sexist antagonism targeted towards women, sexist benevolence will also influence prejudice against women in the social context.

Note: Self Efficacy Theory from "Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioural change" by Bandura, A., 1978, *Advances in Behaviour Research and Therapy*, *1*(4), 139–161. https://doi.org/10.1016/0146-6402(78)90002-4; Double Standards from "Double Standards for Competence: Theory and Research" by Foschi, M., *Annual Review of Sociology*, *26*, 21–42.; Social Role Theory from "Social role theory. *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology"*, by Eagly & Wood, *March*, 458–476. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446249222.n49; TAS from "An Ambivalent Alliance: Hostile and Benevolent Sexism as Complementary Justifications for Gender Inequality" by Glick, P & Fiske, S., 2001, Australasian Psychiatry, 56 (2), 109-118, https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.2.109; Lack of Fit model from "Combatting gender discrimination: A lack of fit framework.", Heilman, M. E., & Caleo, S., 2018, *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, *21*(5), 725–744. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430218761587

Appendix H: Previous Studies Related to Female Entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka

Study	Purpose	Data Collection	Broader Conclusion
Ranasinghe (2008)	Realizing the potential of female entrepreneurship towards the uplifting of economic conditions in Sri Lanka study is primarily focusing towards exploring factors affecting towards success of female entrepreneurs	Interviews being conducted with six female entrepreneurs who were recognized as outstanding performers at the Women's Chamber of Industry and Commerce (WCIC) awards in Sri Lanka	Childhood experience, psychological characteristics, entrepreneurial competencies, learning, external support, and culture being recognized as predominant characteristics affecting towards success of female entrepreneurs. Independence and the opportunities to explore creativity at the childhood has been recognized as a predominant factor affecting towards success of female entrepreneurs. Motherly and caring approach towards their employees being other characteristics commonly share by these entrepreneurs. Individual's linkages with their families and family culture also played a predominant role.
Hewamanne (2020)	To explore how the Free Trade Zones (FTZ) (which were criticized on the grounds of postcolonial neoliberal ethos leading to exploitative labor practices) help towards uplifting female entrepreneurship among the	Ethnographic study being conducted over 8 years where the study was evolving around 37 former FTZ female workers who returned to their villages after their tenure in FTZ	Despite of the deeply embedded gender norms and stigmatization on women migrating to FTZ, deprived women from the rural areas of the country who migrated to the FTZ as employees managed to accrue the financial capital, networking, knowledge and grooming which became much useful for them to start their own ventures which is not an option for the non-migrant village girls. However, it is has been found that not only these resources they acquired from

	poor girls from rural areas who work at the FTZ and how their entrepreneurial initiatives change the deeply embedded socio-cultural and gender norms in the remote villages		the FTZ but their own ability and traits to integrate such capital with village socio-cultural context plays a pivotal role towards their success as households, family culture and village culture plays a predominant role in female entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, study substantiate how the new formed entrepreneurial segment help to renegotiate and change gender norms in the society which work as a disguise blessing for changing the deeply rooted gender norms.
Kodagoda & Samaratunge (2022)	Study takes an effort to explore how mothers negotiate between their motherhood responsibilities and entrepreneurial commitments in Sri Lanka which has deeply ingrained socio—cultural norms	In-depth interviews being conducted with 20 female entrepreneurs who have children and who are from the Western Province	Deeply rooted motherhood role expectations from society are reflected through the entrepreneurial initiatives taken up by the mothers in Sri Lanka, where they determine success as a combination of engaging in motherhood responsibilities while engaging in economic activity. The main strategies used by mothers who embrace entrepreneurial roles are using family support to balance the family sphere and flexible work arrangements to balance the entrepreneurial sphere. However, it is more evident that rather than evolving their family commitments around work, the women prioritize family and motherhood responsibilities and try to create a business around that, which results in these businesses being low-growth, small ventures.

Surangi (2018)	Realizing the impact of networking towards entrepreneurial businesses study is focusing towards exploring how Sri Lankan female entrepreneurs (small business owners in tourism industry) networking behaviour being influenced and shaped up.	Interviews and follow up interviews being conducted with 20 female small business owners from Southern Province who operate in the Tourism Industry	Role identities being socially constructed, society has expectations from woman for different identities they hold as dutiful wife, good mother, and business owner. In the Sri Lankan context women are expected to prioritize upon wife and motherhood roles and entrepreneurship related networking behaviors that take off time and energy from such typical female role expectations are socially unaccepted and create tension among women themselves due to what has been internalized to them over the years as what is expected from a woman. Despite of the female entrepreneurs' tendency to initiate businesses around their family homes, it is apparent that many discriminatory trajectories in the larger society towards women may confine women's involvement in networking opportunities.
Adikaram & Razik (2022)	Study focused on studying the challenges and discriminatory trajectories for female entrepreneurs in the STEM field of Sri Lanka	In-depth interviews were being taken up with 15 female entrepreneurs in the STEM filed who are working in the capacity of entrepreneur for more than a year	While the male gendered identity given to the entrepreneurship make the pathway for female entrepreneurs being challenging it will be further rugged for female entrepreneurs in the STEM filed due to the identification of STEM as a male gendered field. Substantiating the intersectionality in female entrepreneurship challenges for female entrepreneurs in the STEM field are more exaggerated and detrimental. Further, situation will be

			adverse if the particular female entrepreneur belongs to a STEM and if she is Muslim or Hindu. Lack of family support, procedural difficulties, not being able to strike a work life balance, lack of trust about the female entrepreneurial capabilities, survival, and future and challenges for obtaining finance being key challenges these were being further exacerbated due to recognition of STEM as a male gendered profession and the lack of understanding about the STEM among the society.
De Silva et al. (2021)	Study had focused on the challenges for female entrepreneurs to initiate businesses and the consequence of such ventures towards their empowerment with special refence to the beauty salon industry in Sri Lanka	Data collection was done through focus group discussion which was attended by 12 female beauty salon owners who are operating the outer skirts of Colombo	Larger society and family's negative perception towards female entrepreneurship, difficulties in obtaining finance, lack of awareness on setting up a business and low self-efficacy and confidence being identified as foremost hurdles for female entrepreneurs. As women recognize motherhood as their central role, striking a work-life balance, physical and mental exhaustion due to playing multiple roles of mother, wife and a business owner were being challenging for women entrepreneurs. Despite the much discouragement towards women engage in entrepreneurship, the women who somehow initiate businesses confirm that initiation of such businesses enhance their economic conditions as well as family and social states

			where they got more decision-making power and recognition.

Note: Author developed by using previous literature from many author

Appendix I: Survey Instrument

Survey on Female Digital Entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka.

You are invited to participate in a PhD study conducted by Irosha Sanjeewani Perera from Dublin City University's Business School. This study examines what drives women in Sri Lanka to get involved in digital entrepreneurship and their experiences as female digital entrepreneurs.

What are we asking you to do? Participation in this research involves completing a survey. The survey consists of 07 sections and will take approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

How is your information protected? We do not collect any personally identifiable information and your responses will remain completely anonymous and confidential. The survey's participation is completely voluntary. Once you opt to take the survey if you change your mind at any time, you have complete discretion to withdraw yourself without giving reasons/justifications for your decision. All responses will be stored securely for 24 months after the completion of the survey and will be carefully disposed of after that.

Additional Information: You can contact the researcher via email at athukoralalage.perera3@mail.dcu.ie if you have any queries or are interested in learning more about the study's results. If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact **The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000**

Section 01: Environmental Influences

This section includes questions related to broader environmental factors economic instability, attitude towards women and perceived formal institutional support which influence your decision to pursue a digital entrepreneurial venture.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Economic Instability					
1. I am concerned about the possibility that I might not be able to provide myself/my family with the bare essentials in the next 12 months.					
2. It seems to me that I have few of those qualities that are valued in the economic situation of today.					
3. I am concerned that I might lose my job.					
4. Even in a situation that the enterprise or organization where I work, for some reason will close tomorrow, and all workers will be laid off still I will be able to find work, no worse than my present job					
Attitude Towards Women					

5. Under modern economic conditions, with women active outside the home, men should share in household tasks such as washing dishes and doing laundry.					
6. Women should worry less about their rights and more about becoming good wives and mothers.					
7. Women should assume their rightful place in business and all the professions along with men.					
8. A woman should not expect to go to the same places or to have quite the same freedom of action as a man.					
9. Sons in a family should be given more encouragement to go to college than daughters.					
10. Economic and social freedom is worth far more to women than acceptance of the ideal of femininity, which has been set up by men.					
11. There are many jobs in which men should be given preference over women in being hired or promoted.					
12. Women should be given equal opportunity with men for apprenticeship in the various trades.					
Perceived Formal Institutional Support					
13. The people working for government agencies have been competent and effective in supporting the digital businesses of women.					
14. Any female digital entrepreneur who needs help from a government program for a new business can find what she needs.					
15. The support for new and growing firms is a high priority for policy at the local government level					

The next question is included in order to check your attention. Please choose the word 'December' as your answer

16. Which is the first month of the year?			
October	December	January	March

Section 2: Individual Influences-Personal Influences

This section includes questions related to the role of significant individuals in your life and the positive outcomes you derived by engaging in entrepreneurial activities previously which enable and encourage you to pursue a digital entrepreneurial business.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Role Model					
17. Having a female entrepreneur in the family made me seriously consider embarking on an entrepreneurial career.					

18. A guest female entrepreneur at an event/ programme made me seriously consider embarking on an entrepreneurial career.					
19. A personal encounter with a successful female entrepreneur made me seriously consider embarking on an entrepreneurial career					
Family Support					
20. When I'm frustrated by my business, someone in my family tries to understand.					
21. Family members often go above and beyond what is normally expected to help my business succeed.					
22. My family gives me useful feedback about my ideas concerning my business.					
23. Family members often contribute to my business without expecting to be paid.					

Previous Work Experience

Please select “yes” or “no” as the answer

24. Do you have any previous experience as an entrepreneur?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If the answer is “yes” please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
25. Previous work experience motivated me to sustain myself in the business.					
26. Previous work experience enhanced my leadership skills.					
27. I have expanded my professional network during my previous entrepreneurial engagements.					
28. Previous work experience influenced me to perform the various roles and tasks of digital entrepreneurship successfully.					

Section 3: Individual Influences-Digital Self Efficacy

The following questions are related to an individual's judgement about her capabilities to adopt digital technologies to her entrepreneurial business.

Digital Self Efficacy	1	2	3	4	5
29. I feel competent to search for specific information in digital environments.					
30. I feel competent to distinguish between correct and incorrect digital information.					
31. I feel competent to store and organize digital content so that I can easily find it again					
32. I feel competent to interact with others in digital environments.					
33. I feel competent to share information and data with others digitally.					
34. I feel competent to participate in public discussions and activities in digital environments.					
35. I feel competent to use digital systems to collaborate with others.					
36. I feel competent to identify legal aspects in digital environments, such as terms of use and licenses.					
37. I feel competent to protect my digital devices from unwanted access.					
38. I feel competent to protect my personal data in digital environments.					
39. I feel competent to identify and improve the digital skills I lack.					

The next question is included in order to check your attention. Please choose the word 'cat' as your answer.

40. What is the name of a baby dog?			
Doggy	Cat	Camry	Rabbit

Section 4: Individual Influences - Motives

The following questions are related to inner psychological drives that influence women to initiate and run digital businesses.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1	2	3	4	5

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

Self-realization

The following questions are related to woman's desire to pursue a digital entrepreneurial pathway to actualize their expectations shaped by their passion and dreams.

Self-realization	1	2	3	4	5
41. Establishing a digital business enables me to challenge myself.					
42. Establishing a digital business enables me to fulfil a personal vision.					
43. Establishing a digital business enables me to lead and motivate others.					
44. Establishing a digital business enables me to grow and learn as a person.					

Financial Success

The following questions are related to women's desire to pursue financial goals and generate financial wealth by pursuing a digital business.

Financial Success	1	2	3	4	5
45. With the digital business that I started I will be able to give myself, my spouse, and my children financial security.					
46. With the digital business that I started I will be able to earn a larger personal income.					
47. With the digital business that I started I will be able to have a chance to build great wealth/high income.					
48. With the digital business that I started I will be able to build a business my children can inherit.					

Recognition

The following questions are related to a woman's yearning for acceptance and recognition from society which she tries to attain through engaging in digital business.

Recognition	1	2	3	4	5
48. The digital business I started enabled me to achieve a higher position for myself in society.					
49. The digital business I started enabled me to have more influence in my community.					
50. The digital business I started enabled me to be respected by friends.					
51. The digital business I started enabled me to achieve something and get recognition for it.					
52. The digital business I started enabled me to increase the status and prestige of my family.					

Focused Immersion

Focused Immersion	1	2	3	4	5
53. While using the Web I can block out most other distractions.					
54. While using the Web, I am absorbed in what I am doing.					
55. While on the Web, I am immersed in the task I am performing.					
56. When on the Web, I get distracted by other attentions very easily.					
58. While on the Web, my attention does not get diverted very easily					

Innovation

The following questions are related to women's desire to come up with some new product, service, or business model for the world which they try to attain through digital businesses.

Innovation	1	2	3	4	5
58. Establishing this new digital business allows me to be innovative and at the forefront of new technology.					
59. Establishing this new digital business allows me to develop an idea for a product.					
60. Establishing this new digital business allows me to continue learning					

Independence

The following questions are related to a woman's desire to engage in digital business as she perceives it to attain the desired work-life balance.

Independence	1	2	3	4	5
61. A digital business venture enables me to control my own time.					
62. Digital business venture enables me to have greater flexibility for my personal and family life.					
63. Digital business venture enables me to have considerable freedom to adopt my own approach to work.					

Section 5: Fear of Failure

Please indicate "yes" or "no" for the following statements

64. Fear of failure prevented me from starting a digital business

Yes ☐ No ☐

Section 6: Digital Entrepreneurial Intention

The following questions are related to inner psychological drives that influence women to initiate and run digital businesses.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

Digital Entrepreneurial Intention	1	2	3	4	5
65. Online business activities are attractive to me.					
66. Doing online business activities gives me satisfaction.					
67. Most of the people I know appreciate me doing business in online media					

Section 7: Personal Demographics and Business-Related Information

Please tick the box that best describes you.

65. Age

18-24 years	
25-34 years	
35-44 years	
45-54 years	
55 years or above	

66. Marital Status

Single	
Married	
Divorced or separated	
Other	

67. Level of Income (select based on your monthly average income)

Below Rs 20000	
Rs 20000 -Rs 60000	
Rs 60001 - Rs 100000	
Rs 100001 - Rs 200000	
Above Rs 200000	

68. What is the highest level of education you have achieved to date?

Below GCE Ordinary Level	
GCE Ordinary Level	
GCE Advanced Level or Equivalent	
Diploma Holder	
Undergraduate Degree Holder	
Postgraduate Degree Holder	
Other, please specify:	

69. Please indicate the type of area in which you currently live

Municipal and Urban Councils	
Pradesheeya Sabhas	

70. Please specify the name of the council or Pradesheeya Sabha……

71. Which industry best describes the digital business that you are currently doing?

Retail trade (e.g. selling food/clothes/shoes/handcrafts/electronic equipment etc. through online platforms)	
Finance, insurance, real estate (e.g. property selling websites/	
Professional, scientific, and management services (e.g. business consultancy/legal advisory)	
Education (e.g. online tutoring/educational apps)	
Healthcare and Fitness (e.g. Zumba, yoga, aerobics, personal fitness training classes/fitness apps)	
Transport and Logistics (e.g. transport apps such as Pick Me)	
Other, please specify:	

73. Which of the following technologies do you use to access the Internet? (Please tick all that apply)

Personal Computer (PC) / mobile phone	

Laptop	
Smartphone	
Tablet	
Other, please specify: _____	

74. Please use this space to make any additional comments regarding digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka, the survey, or any other factors which motivated you to become a digital entrepreneur.

Thank you for taking the time to participate.

Appendix J: Sample Posters of the Survey

Figure 1: English Mediukm Invitation Poster

Figure 2: English Medium Reminder Poster

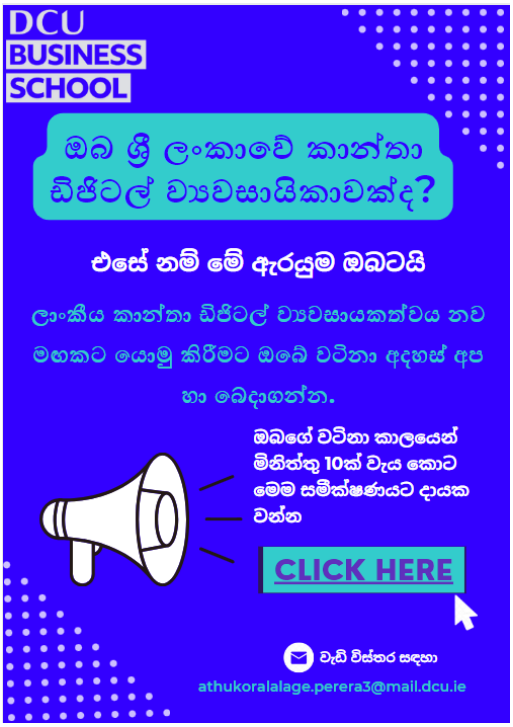


Figure 3-Sinhala Medium Invitation Poster

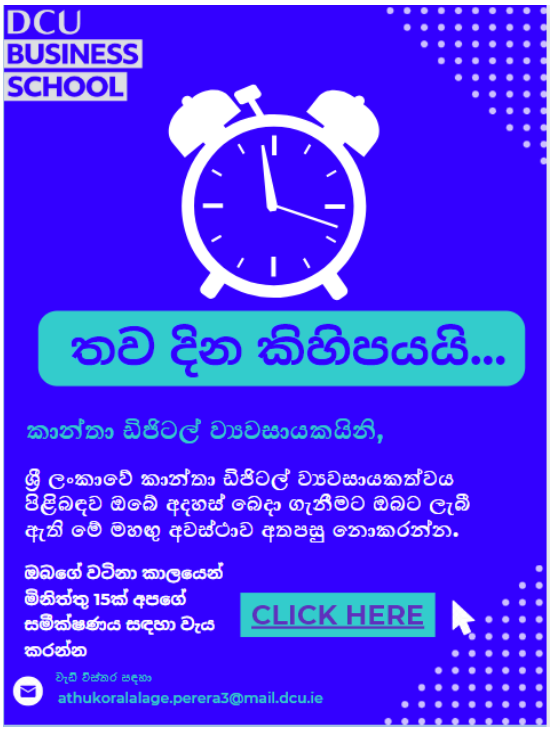
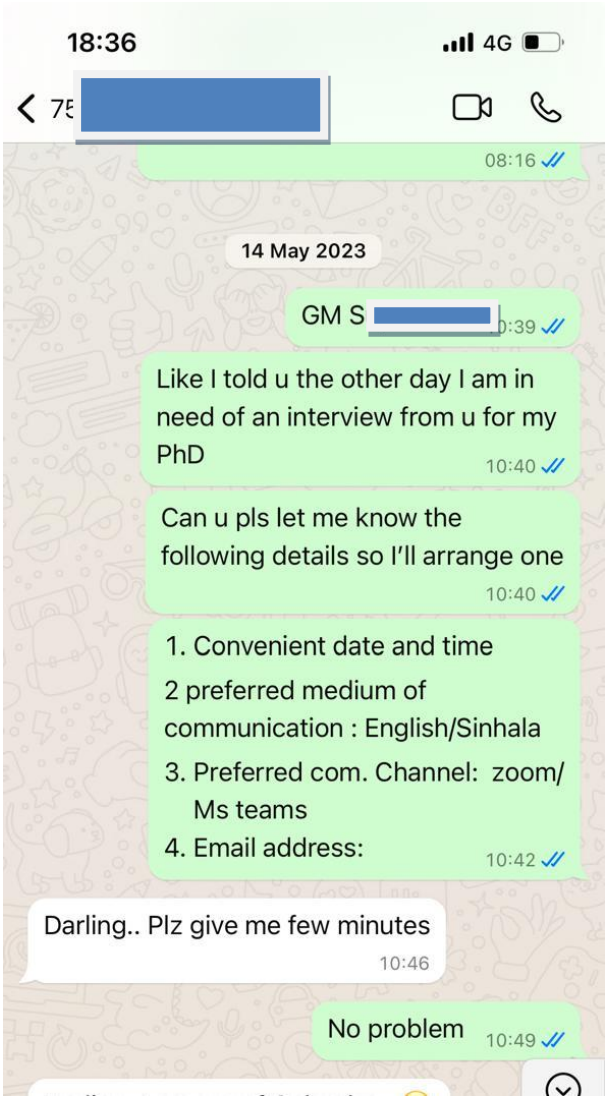


Figure 4-Sinhala Medium Reminder Poster

Appendix K: Sample Whatsapp Message Sent To Potential Interviewees



Appendix L: Interview Consent Form

A Critical Exploration of the Emancipatory Potential of Digital Entrepreneurship for Women in the Sri Lankan Context.

You are invited to participate in a PhD study conducted by Irosha Sanjeewani Perera, under the supervision of Professor Maura McAdam and Professor Regina Connolly at DCU Business School in Ireland. This study explores what drives female digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka and whether such engagement in digital entrepreneurship will provide socio-economic benefits. As a female digital entrepreneur in Sri Lanka, you are invited to participate in a one-to-one interview conducted by the researcher via Zoom. The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. The research team will seek your kind consent to audio record the interviews for analysis and record-keeping purposes.

Please complete the following questions by ticking "yes" or "no"

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	*Yes/No*	
I understand the information provided		*Yes/No*
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	*Yes/No*	
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	*Yes/No*	
I am aware that my interview will be audiotaped		*Yes/No*

My participation for this study is completely voluntary. I reserve the right to withdraw my participation from this study at any given stage without providing any reasons for the said withdrawal. If I do withdraw from the study, I understand that it will not affect any relationship I have with DCU or any other organisation. I am aware that the information I provide in the interview will be confidential and stored in a password-protected format in a Google Drive at DCU which is accessible only by the research team. Furthermore, it is informed to me that the information will be securely stored for two years after the completion of the project and will be destroyed carefully in an irrecoverable manner. However, if the research team becomes aware of any information which may compromise me, I am aware that the research team is legally obliged to report it to me.

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Participants Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Date: _____

Appendix M: Online Interview Protocol

Female Digital Entrepreneurial Intention Interview

Interviewer:	**Irosha Sanjeewani Perera**
Mode:	Zoom
Purpose of Interview:	To gain insights into the experiences of female digital entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka
Time Duration:	60 to 90 minutes approximately

I appreciate your acceptance to participate in our Zoom interview which may take 60 to 90 minutes. To help you prepare and ensure a smooth interview experience, please work according to the below guidelines:

Technical Preparation

- To ensure proper communication, test your audio and video settings before the interview.
- Check your internet connection for stability to prevent disruptions during the interview. Close any unnecessary applications that may consume bandwidth.
- Familiarize yourself with the basic features of Zoom, such as muting/unmuting, camera on/off, and screen sharing.

Interview Environment

- To reduce background noise and distractions, it would be good if you could select a calm and well-lit area for the interview.
- Ensure your background is professional and free from any sensitive or inappropriate content.
- If your physical environment is not suitable, consider using a neutral virtual background.

Time Management

- Please try to join the Zoom meeting a few minutes before the scheduled interview time.
- If you anticipate any situations that may necessitate an adjustment to our meeting time, kindly notify me via email as soon as possible.

Communication

- As we continue with the interviews, please ensure that both your microphone and

camera are in optimal working condition to facilitate clear and effective communication.

- Maintain eye contact with the camera to simulate direct eye contact with the interviewer.
- During the meeting, I kindly request that you minimize disruptions by refraining from taking phone calls or stepping away from the meeting intermittently (whenever possible). This will help to maintain a focused and productive discussion.

Preparation

- Review the research project's details, objectives, and any materials provided beforehand.
- Before the interview seek clarifications or address any doubts you may have by asking questions
- Be prepared to discuss your experiences, opinions, and insights as a female digital entrepreneur in Sri Lanka.

Technology Back-Up

- Have an alternative device (such as a smartphone or tablet through which you can connect to the meeting) on standby in case of technical issues.
- Please ensure that your devices are fully charged to mitigate any potential challenges arising from power failures during our meeting.
- Save the interviewer's contact details in case you need to communicate any difficulties.

Recording

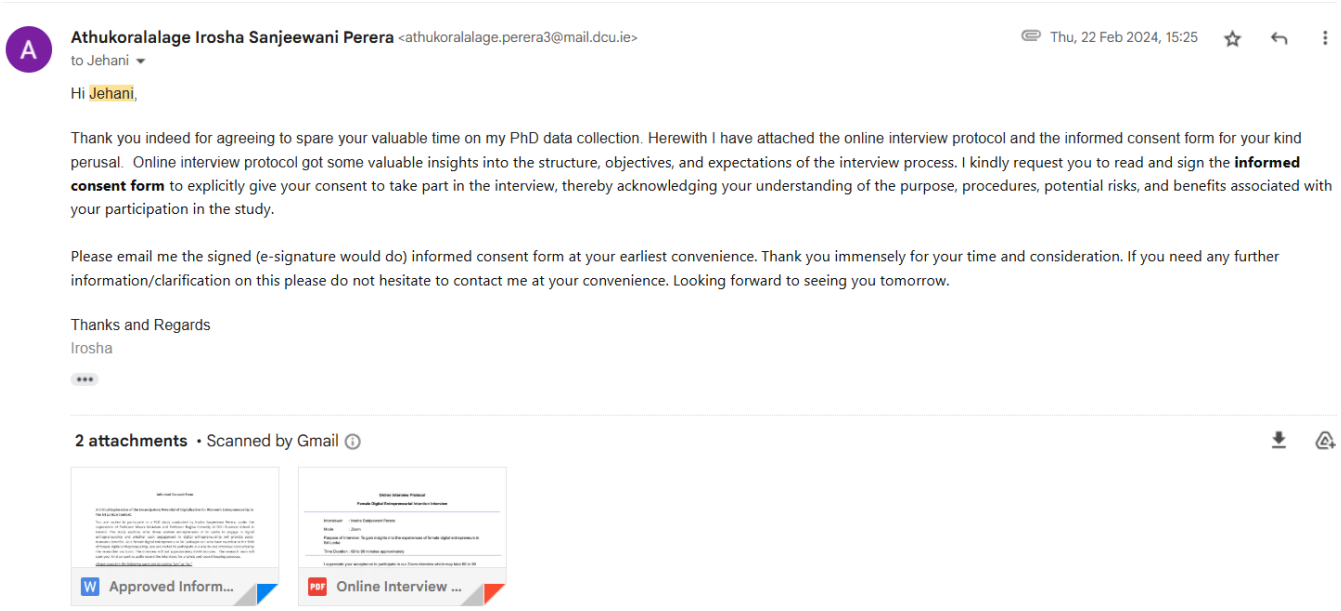
- Meetings are recorded by the host upon receiving your consent. Granting consent for the recording of your interview is entirely voluntary.
- Understand the purpose of the recording and how it will be used for the research project.

Decline/Withdraw from the Interview

- At any time during the interview, if you feel uncomfortable or wish to discontinue, please know that you are free to exit by simply clicking the “Leave Meeting” button and informing the host that you are withdrawing.
- You are free to exit without the need to provide any reasons.

Your valuable insights are much appreciated. Thank you immensely for your participation!

Appendix N: Sample Email Requesting the Signed Informed Consent Form



Athukoralalage Irosha Sanjeewani Perera <athukoralalage.perera3@mail.dcu.ie> Thu, 22 Feb 2024, 15:25

to Jehani

Hi Jehani,

Thank you indeed for agreeing to spare your valuable time on my PhD data collection. Herewith I have attached the online interview protocol and the informed consent form for your kind perusal. Online interview protocol got some valuable insights into the structure, objectives, and expectations of the interview process. I kindly request you to read and sign the **informed consent form** to explicitly give your consent to take part in the interview, thereby acknowledging your understanding of the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits associated with your participation in the study.

Please email me the signed (e-signature would do) informed consent form at your earliest convenience. Thank you immensely for your time and consideration. If you need any further information/clarification on this please do not hesitate to contact me at your convenience. Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.

Thanks and Regards
Irosha

2 attachments • Scanned by Gmail

Approved Inform...

Online Interview ...

Appendix O: Interview Guide

Introduction

First and foremost, I must thank you for sparing your valuable time for this meeting. Before we commence, I'll give you a brief introduction to what we're doing today. The interview will consist of questions related to your personal experience as a female digital entrepreneur in Sri Lanka. There are no right or wrong answers, as I'm particularly interested in your opinion and you don't have to disclose any information you perceive as sensitive, but again if you do, they'll be confidential **(Info that you provide will be confidential)**. Upon your consent, I will audio record the interview on this device itself. The interview is completely confidential; your real name or business name will not appear in any dissertation report, article, presentation, or any other document that will be developed in light of this data. The interview will be transcribed by myself, and all the digital files related to interview recordings will be stored as a password-protected digital file in DCU Google Drive. If you would rather not answer a question or want to stop at any time that's completely fine. The interview should last between 45 to 60 minutes. Do you have you any questions before we start?

Background

1. To start I would like to know some background information about yourself. Could you please tell me about your age, educational background, where you currently live, marital status and if you have any dependent children?
2. For how many years has your digital business been in operation?
3. Would you please tell me the nature of your digital business (types of goods/services provided by your digital business/Is it a sole proprietorship or partnership/are you dealing with end customers?
4. What funding source(s) did you use to start the digital business?

Factors that drive you to navigate digital entrepreneurial pathway.

5. What motivated you to start a digital business (desire for self-fulfilment/desire for financial gains/ to get recognized/to introduce some new product/service to the world/desire for freedom)?
6. How does the prevailing economic instability in the country impacted towards your digital entrepreneurial journey?
7. What is your attitude about women getting into entreprenrial roles?
8. What do you think about the support provided by the Sri Lankan government and related institutions towards encouraging female digital entrepreneurship?
9. How did your family feel about you setting up a digital business and did they help you? (probe: does it male or female family members who are helping you mostly)
10. Could you please share your experiences particularly regarding the role of male family members, such as fathers, husbands, brothers, or other male relatives, in supporting or your pursuits in digital entrepreneurship?
11. Could you explain your experience with a role model of a "female digital entrepreneur" (probe: whether you had any/how you got to know her/what are the biggest learnings you've got from her)
12. (If they say they don't have role models) Can you discuss why some successful female entrepreneurs may be hesitant to engage as role models for other women in the digital business space?
13. Could you please tell me whether you had any prior work experience?
14. If you have worked prior to starting your digital business, could you please tell whether the prior work experience helped you to become a successful entrepreneur?
15. Do you feel comfortable dealing with different technological devices for your business?
16. What are the major challenges you face when dealing with digital technological devices for your business?
17. In your opinion, does the formal higher education you got really contribute to the development of skills and knowledge necessary for you to work as a digital entreprenure?
18. Do you think digital business as a viable pathway for women with low income?

Reflections based on the digital entrepreneurial experiences.

19. Do you believe you made the right choice by becoming a female digital entrepreneur in Sri Lanka?
20. What are the major benefits you've attained from engaging in digital businesses?
21. What challenges have you faced in creating and managing a digital business (trust in online selling; developing digital capabilities; locating customers; self-presentation issues and emulating success; the need to edit content)?
22. Would you like to recommend digital entrepreneurship as a viable career path for other women in Sri Lanka?
23. What advice would you give to women wishing to start a digital/online business?
24. What are the recommendations that you propose to enhance digital entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka?
25. Other than what we've discussed is there anything you would like to add regarding your experience as a digital entrepreneur?

Appendix P: Sample Reflective Notes

Reflections based on an Interview with Kenu

Same as the other female digital entrepreneurs with young kids I've interviewed Kenu was also opted to have the meeting during the morning hours while her kids are at school. After many cancellations and changes of dates, finally I managed to have a zoom meeting with Kenu on 13th March 2024 around 11.00 am. Kenu has joined to the zoom meeting with her second child as she has suddenly woken up from the sleep. Among the other female digital entrepreneurs who use digital platforms to sell the physical products Kenu's venture was much bigger and complex. She can be recognized as a STEM entrepreneur. Despite much academic accomplishments and great potential for growth, Kenu's business was also represented a life-style choice of an entrepreneur which is more or less like other female digital entrepreneurs I interviewed. Even though her transition to the female digital entrepreneurship was inspired by many factors, she specifically states that if not to the flexibility offered by the digital platforms, she would have never thought of starting off her own business. Despite of many accomplishments she made in her career field as a South Asian girl who grew up in patriarchal gender norms when it comes to the motherhood Kenu was not able to think about her motherhood responsibilities as secondary to anything.

Sri Lankan been an educationally heavy country individuals like Kenu are unique and special cases which you may not meet generally. Kenu is a talented young scientist (PhD holder) who has taken a very bold step to pursue digital business which is not much of a popular decision in Sri Lanka than getting employed in the academic sector or migrating to a developed country (these are the two popular options among the PhD holders in the country). Explaining her experience as a female digital entrepreneur in Sri Lanka Kenu told me that as a scientist mom she was paranoid by all the skin care products available for kids in the marketplace which comprise of toxic ingredients and chemicals. Thus, as a mother and as a scientist she found a great responsibility towards introducing more healthy solution for children in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, discussing the economic instability prevailing in the country she substantiated that if she did the manufacturing of the product in another country, she could have done it at half of the current cost. Amidst of foregoing such benefits Kenu still prefer to operate in Sri Lanka as she really wants to contribute something to her own country. Through all these aspects it become evident that the benefits of female digital entrepreneurship which spill over to enhance social conditions.

In retrospective to the interviews that has been conducted thus far it became evident that women's businesses predominantly arise as a response to the challenges encountered by women. Including Kenu's business many other business ventures introduced by women using digital platforms tend to serve as solutions tailored to address their specific needs and experiences. Furthermore, this interview prompted me to contemplate the impact of intersectionality towards women's digital business choices. While accomplished women like Kenu who got good educational background, social class, better income levels, access to network, comfortable geographical location and solid support system tend to pursue more viable and sustainable business ventures targeting on niche it may not be the same for women who are marginalized as an intersection of many social ascriptions. Thus, it becomes evident that digital entrepreneurship as a meritocratic space will not offer the same effects for diverse individuals.

Reflections based on the interview with Sachini

Sachini's interview was scheduled to be held on 11th March 2024, around 3. 00 pm. Sachini was one such interviewee who was much enthusiastic about taking part for the interview and she is one among those few who have came after reading the online interview protocol. She has sent me the duly completed informed consent form way before and sent me a LinkedIn request also which showcase that she has done her home work well before attending the interview. At the interview it became evident to me that her preparedness and willingness towards joining for study may have derived from the very heavy educational background that she has. Sachini was a fashion design graduate from one of the leading state universities in Sri Lanka and her business of making personalized peg doll creation was also an extension of a university project that she did as an undergraduate. Thus, Sachini is an exception when compared to many female digital entrepreneurs whom I interviewed previously who are doing businesses which are different to the formal educational attainments they had. Imperativeness of refining our degree programmes to ensure that those are providing necessary skills demanded by the industry is much reflected through the discussion of Sachini. The particular university that Sachini studied is renowned as the best university in the country which produces STEM graduates who are much industry ready. Throughout the discussion it was highlighted and appreciated by Sachini how the education she got from the university helped her to take up many novel business initiatives.

Most importantly, like for many girls who grown in upper middle-income families in the urban Colombo, Sachini was exposed to digital technology from the very young age. Her

geographical location, education, family background and social status enabled Sachini to have much higher digital literacy from the very young age itself. She has explicitly mentioned that she initially derived the business concept from online sources. As a digital native who has grown up in the digital age, having been exposed to and familiar with digital technologies from a young age Sachini seemed to have cutting edge when stepping into digital entrepreneurship. Reverberating the thoughts of many previous digital entrepreneurs whom I interviewed previously, Sachini has also mentioned her lack of experience related to role models in the local context. Even though she was inspired by many international female artists and businesswomen she couldn't think of any role models in the local context or any other digital businesswoman who stepped into providing her with mentorship. Like many previous interviewees who navigate the pathway of female digital entrepreneurship, Sachini was also not forgotten to mention about the enormous role played by the significant men in her life. Sachini's voice was breaking when she started talking about how her father is helping her with the sourcing of materials. She said that during the initial stages of her business she use to buy materials from close by retailers as she was not sure whether she'll be able to deal with the famous wholesalers in "Moratuwa" (a famous marketplace for wood here in Sri Lanka) which is a much male dominant setting. She said how her father is still accompanying her to buy the materials even though now she is familiar with the places and vendors. With humble satisfaction Sachini reminded about her boyfriend who is handling the digital promotions part of the business mainly. While she was appreciating the freedom given to her by the boyfriend it made me think about the famous idiom "a puppet is free as long as he loves his strings". The phenomenon of women expressing gratitude for the freedom granted by their male counterparts can be interpreted as indicative of a societal architype where gender roles have reinforced male dominance, leading women to internalize expectations of subservience or dependency as normal. Even for a woman like Sachini who can be recognized as a female belonging to the privileged segment in the developing context, both nature and nurture made her to believe that male domination over women as what is normal.

Sachini was gentle, soft spoken and very polite which makes her an ideal representation of feminine which are not the general expectations from "a boss lady". Yet she has navigated through the barriers and identified a market niche, created a brand which is much established and popular. This made us re-think about the juxtaposing the male characteristics with entrepreneurial traits.

Appendix Q: From Findings to Recommendations

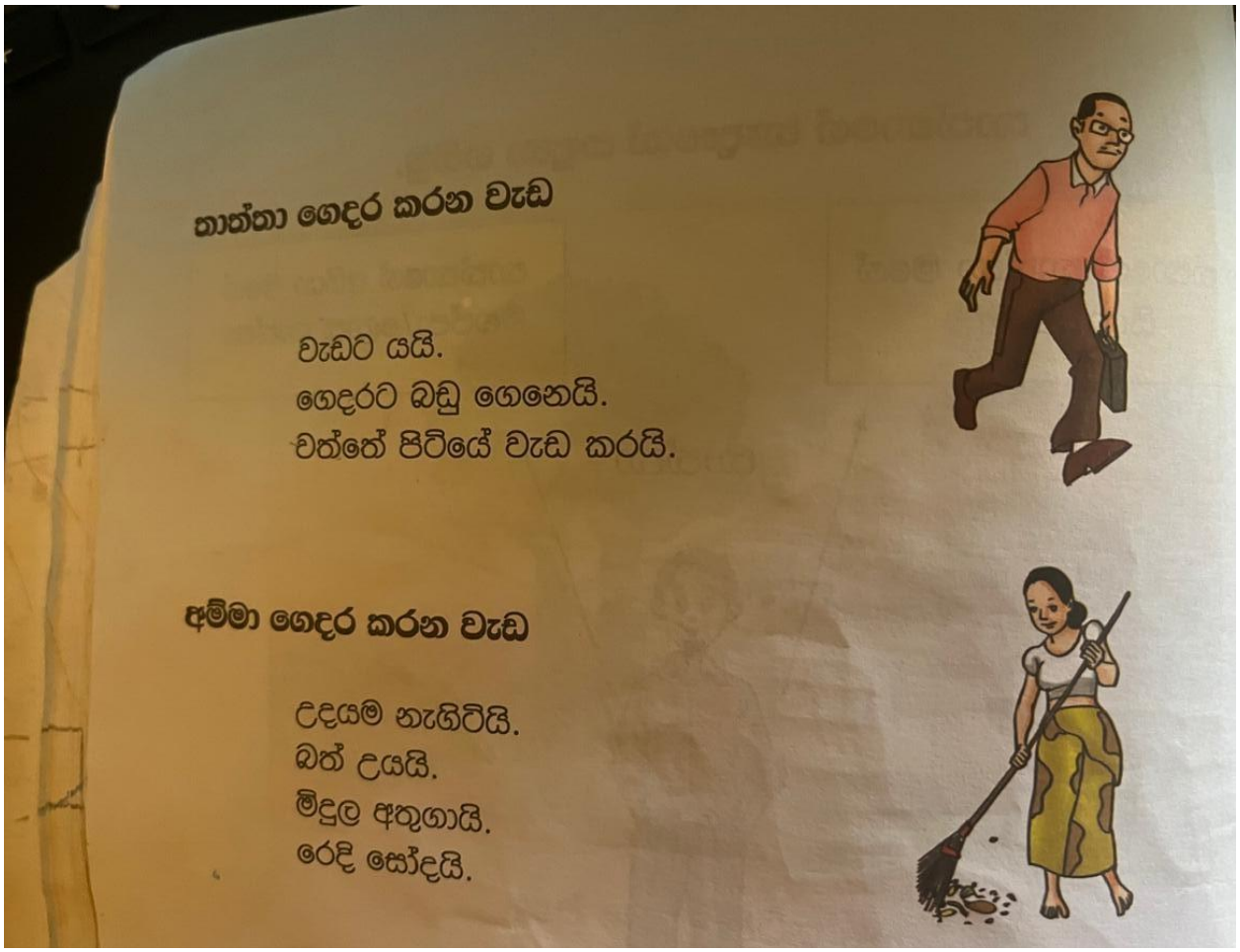
Key Findings	Recommendations	Actions to implement recommendations
Economic uncertainties as a driving force for FDE.	Women should be educated about how digital entrepreneurship can counter the adversities derived from economic uncertainties and create a conducive environment for FDE.	• Developing area-based digital entrepreneurial hubs and information counters to provide necessary guidance and support for women to start digital businesses. • To expedite the starting of businesses, bureaucratic hurdles should be reduced by streamlining registration processes and making resources accessible. • Make mental health support accessible to women as economic uncertainties, career changes, and new roles as digital entrepreneurs can be mentally exhausting for women.
Gradual transformation of societal attitudes about women	Disrupt patriarchal gender norms and foster gender parity through education.	• Curriculum reforms to primary school syllabus to reflect that household activities and childcare are gender-neutral and can be performed by anyone. • Create awareness about the gendered division of labour, marginalization of women, and the need for women's empowerment. • Use mass media-based promotional strategies to legitimize women in conventionally male-dominant sectors and vice versa (Ex: in commercials showcasing men cooking and cleaning dishes). • Identify women who become successful in male-dominant sectors as role models and celebrate them.
Lack of state-sector support	Policy amendments and initiatives to overcome the state sector inefficiencies.	• Simplify the processes related to business registration. • Make women aware of these simplified processes through social media and by introducing dedicated hotlines. • Conducting training programs and awareness campaigns for state sector officials about FDE, professionalism, and client handling. • Give more publicity and awareness about the programmes conducted by the government to enhance FDE (use mass

	Reform and develop new educational policies to foster FDE.	media, social media campaigns, and online communities dedicated to women's empowerment). • Integrate entrepreneurship into the school syllabus and make it a more practical subject. • Take initiatives to update ICT education and to develop English language competencies. • Educational reforms at the primary school education to dismantle widely accepted gender norms in society.
Perceived occupational prestige disparity	Taking up strategies to enhance the public image of FDE.	• The government collaborates with other apex bodies and organize awareness programs, award ceremonies, and appreciation events targeting female digital entrepreneurs. • Use mass media as well as social media as a platform to promote successful female digital entrepreneurs as role models and share their positive stories
Familial male allies as a key driving force for FDE	Fostering a culture that results in the male legitimization of FDE.	• Fathers and husbands who helped their daughters and wives to become successful digital entrepreneurs should be recognized as role models and give opportunities to share their stories through mass media, social platforms, and community events. • Celebrating these men at the award ceremonies.
Successful female digital entrepreneurs' reluctance to act as role models for others.	Policymakers should take necessary initiatives to reduce queen bee attitudes among female digital entrepreneurs.	• Raise awareness about the long-standing gender issues and the importance of working collectively to overcome those issues. • State sector bodies can take initiatives to incentivizing these role models for their efforts to foster a collaborative culture.
Virtual networking groups reinforcing women's participation in FDE.	Creating more intentional and supportive virtual networking groups.	• Foster a safe space within virtual networking groups by creating clear privacy and security policies, introducing two-factor authentication, and appointing strong admins and moderators. • Educate cybersecurity practices for group members Ex: building awareness about not sharing bank account details etc.

		• Introducing real-time monitoring systems with the use of digital tools and human moderators • State sector collaborate and work closely with the admins and moderators of the groups and appreciate their service toward women's empowerment.
DSE as a reinforcing factor for FDE	Take proactive strategies to enhance DSE among women	• Curriculum update to ensure enhanced understanding of ICT and the English language. • Give opportunities for networking with others, and involvement with role models which boosts confidence. • Proactive initiatives taken at the policy level to enhance access to digital tools
Marriage drives women to engage in FDE	Taking strategies to create a conducive environment for married women to participate in FDE.	• Establish quality childcare centers in Sri Lanka that particularly cater to the needs of female digital entrepreneurs (flexibility programmes, part-time care, and drop-in facilities) • Campaigns encouraging male allyship (supportive husbands) towards FDE
For rural women, FDE works as a means to overcome geographical barriers. However, their FDE engagement is adversely affected by the urban-rural digital divide and language divide.	State sector involvement in digital infrastructure development.	• Provide subsidies or tax incentives for female digital entrepreneurial women in rural areas to purchase smartphones, tablets, and computers. • Provide affordable broadband solutions and wireless networks • Work on providing uninterrupted power supply to the rural areas • Developing area-based digital entrepreneurial hubs and information counters to provide necessary guidance and support for women to start digital businesses.
FDE is a pathway to overcome barriers that stem from gender intersecting with ethnicity.	Create awareness about the FDE as a liberating pathway for ethnic minority women.	• Get the support of female digital entrepreneurs from ethnic minority groups as role models to share their experiences. • Promote FDE through virtual networking groups dedicated to ethnic minority women.

Tiresome multi-tasking experienced by female digital entrepreneurs.	Inculcate the idea that household responsibilities need to be undertaken by both men and women	• Updating the school syllabus to ensure that in formative years children are being taught that house chores are shared responsibilities. • Build awareness campaigns by showcasing how shared household responsibilities enable women to thrive as female digital entrepreneurs, which enhances the well-being of the whole family. • Celebrating those supportive men who shared household responsibilities as role models. • Using media campaigns to showcase how families can thrive through shared responsibilities.
Female digital entrepreneurs are confined to low-growth and highly competitive women-targeted markets.	Promote women's engagement in high-growth high-profit sectors.	• Introduce entrepreneurial education to all fields including STEM. • Awareness campaigns at universities to inspire young girls in STEM fields to pursue digital businesses in groundbreaking fields. • Use social networking sites to build awareness about non-conventional market opportunities available for potential female digital entrepreneurs. • Provide training programs for school leavers specifically focused on advanced business and technological skills for high-growth sectors. • Providing financial support specifically targeting female entrepreneurs
Gendered control of key business operations such as digital technology, marketing campaigns, and financial management.	Building the capacity of the women to take up these operations and cultural shifts to legitimize women's presence in traditionally male-led domains.	• Provide workshops and training programmes on marketing, and financial management specifically focusing on building competencies among women. • Conduct awareness programmes and build confidence among women by using role models who demonstrate their capabilities in traditionally male-dominant areas like finance, IT, and marketing. • Introducing mentorship programmes that enable entrepreneurial women to get guidance from women who are experts in Finance, Marketing, and IT. • Media campaigns to portray a positive image of women in these conventionally male-dominant fields.

Appendix R: Sample Page From The Grade 1 Textbook



Appendix S: Ethical Approval Letter

Oilscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

DCU

Professor Maura McAdam
DCU Business School

29th November 2023

REC Reference: DCUREC/2023/208 (Notification Review)

Proposal Title: A Critical Exploration of the Emancipatory Potential of **Digitalization for Women's Entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan** Context.

Applicant(s): Professor Maura McAdam, Professor Regina Connolly & Irosha Sanjeewani Prerera

Dear Colleague(s),

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to its review by the committee and resting on the assumption of information accuracy and completeness, DCU REC is pleased to issue ethical approval for this research project. Please include reference to this approval in all materials used to recruit research participants.

Researchers are responsible for ensuring that the research project to which this ethical approval refers is carried out as specifically described in the application form. Should modifications to the research project be required at a later stage, researchers must submit a research amendment application form to REC for approval, prior to the implementation of modifications.

Please note that it is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that any other DCU compliance requirements relevant to the research project, such as those related to data protection, insurance, health and safety, or legal issues, are fully met in advance of initiating the project.

As part of DCU REC's ongoing monitoring process, a research progress report may be required. DCU REC will request this report from the PI as appropriate.

DCU REC wishes you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Melrona Kirrane

Dr. Melrona Kirrane
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

DCU
Research & Innovation

Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht
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Note: Please retain this approval letter for future publication purposes. Research students should include this letter as a thesis appendix.