

Negotiating Identities: Women, Technology and Entrepreneurship in Tourism

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Abstract

This study proposes a conceptual paradigm framework to describe how women entrepreneurs in tourism create and maintain their identities, especially in digitally mediated set up. Five interrelated domains are delineated by the model: core identity, role identity, entrepreneurial identity, digital identity, and structural mediation. Using intersectionality, identity theory, and digital inclusion, it illustrates how institutional access, digital practices, sociocultural roles, and individual beliefs shape entrepreneurial trajectories. The concept highlights the fact that power, representation, and structural inequality affect results, making digital instruments anything but neutral. The model addresses requirements for more context-sensitive approaches to women's entrepreneurship by including social, cultural, and technical issues. In order to encourage inclusive travel via digital empowerment, it provides a foundation for subsequent empirical studies and policy development.

Keywords: Women entrepreneurs; Tourism entrepreneurship; Digital identity; Identity construction; Intersectionality; Digital inclusion.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, women's tourism entrepreneurship has grown dramatically, especially in the global south, where women entrepreneurs are now crucial to community-based development, cultural preservation, and economic diversification (Scheyvens, 2000; UNWTO, 2019). Women use local knowledge and cultural capital to create niche tourism businesses in industries like homestays (Osman et al., 2009; Yaja et al., 2023), culinary endeavors (Ahmad et al., 2024; Cakranegara & Hendrayani, 2022), artisanal crafts (Trupp, 2015; Haddad, 2013), and local tour operations (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016a). Their business paths, however, are hardly well-defined or unhindered. The way women navigate entrepreneurship, carry out their roles, and create their professional identities is mediated by overlapping sociocultural, digital, and structural contexts.

Previously viewed as a static or individualistic quality, entrepreneurial identity is now more widely understood as socially negotiated and contextually situated (Rae, 2005; Down & Reveley, 2004). Particularly among women entrepreneurs in the tourism industry, identity work involves balancing and fulfilling expectations at home, in the community, online exposure, and career goals (Eddleston & Powell, 2008; Stead, 2017). Identity in traditional tourist contexts is frequently based on moral commitments to the family or community, caregiving duties, and historical gender roles (Mazonde, 2016; Acharya & Halpenny, 2013). Conversely, digital tourist environments necessitate deliberate self-positioning, ongoing online interaction, and well considered branding (Sigala, 2017; Khoo et al., 2024). Identity is constantly

negotiated across changing personal, social, and technological terrains for women who operate at the intersection of these domains; it is not expressed. Switching over roles, time-bound, sectoral support by way of fiscal capital and tourist amenities, access to social capital and updating of digital trends poses hurdles in maintaining consistency and efficacy in the functioning of women led tourism entrepreneurial ventures

This conceptual study investigates the ways in which gendered social norms, digital inclusion, and tourism-specific factors combine to influence how women develop their entrepreneurial identities. Recent research shows that digital tools can increase women's market access, flexibility, and autonomy (Kamberidou, 2020; Braun, 2022; Abed, 2021), but it also reveals enduring structural and cultural barriers that make this story more difficult to understand, particularly in traditional or rural societies where literacy, mobility, and access to infrastructure are still gendered (Wiig et al., 2024a; Gurung et al., 2024). Existing research frequently separates identity formation or digital empowerment without considering how they co-evolve in the day-to-day activities of female tourism entrepreneurs.

In addition to changing business procedures, women's use of digital technology in tourist entrepreneurship is also changing the way that entrepreneurial identity is performed and contested. The majority of current research, however, focuses on identity development or digital inclusion separately, paying little attention to the ways in which these aspects interact, especially for women facing sociocultural barriers and uneven access to digital resources. As a conceptual response, this study offers an integrated model of identity production that reflects the interdependencies among social roles, entrepreneurial action, and digital involvement.

Understanding women's entrepreneurial identities in the tourism industry as a multi-layered and dynamic process that is influenced by the interaction of self-perception, social expectations, digital practices, and structural access is the main goal of this study. By combining theoretical elements from intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), identity work (Rae, 2005), and tourism entrepreneurship (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016a; Mazonde, 2016), the study aims to create a framework that clarifies how women create and modify their entrepreneurial identities in both conventional and digitally mediated contexts. By doing this, it contributes to the ongoing discussions about gender, technology, and empowerment by showing how digital inclusion can bring about new demands for performance and digital labor while also facilitating visibility, flexibility, and autonomy (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Sigala, 2017).

Even though the amount of study on women's tourism entrepreneurship has increased, digital capacity, platform involvement, and identity are still mostly treated in distinct streams in recent studies. Although research on digital competencies and platform empowerment identifies significant opportunities and challenges (such as digital skills gaps, platform affordances, and visibility pressures), it provides little theoretical insight into how these factors adjust entrepreneurial identities in tourism contexts (Khoo, Yang, & Tan, 2024; Ditta-Apichai et al., 2024; Morshed & Hernández-Lara, 2024). Although parallel research demonstrates how women use digital technologies to overcome barriers and open up new markets, it frequently prioritizes results over identity work methods (Best et al., 2024; Pécot et al., 2024; Kapota, Giannoukou, & Halkiopoulos, 2023). In addition, socio-cultural studies emphasize how community expectations, family roles, and norms influence legitimacy and access to resources (Wiig et al., 2024b; Naguib, 2024). However, they hardly ever combine these group-level dynamics with Entrepreneurial Identity Theory (EIT) to explain how and why digital adoption results in stronger (or more conflicted) entrepreneurial identities. To put it briefly, we don't have a comprehensive, tourism-specific explanation

that links digital literacy/usage → identity work → strategic conduct, while enclosing this process in the structural circumstances and sociocultural group norms typical of destinations in the Global South.

Using Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a socio-cultural lens, this study fills this gap by putting forth a layered model of women's entrepreneurial identities in tourism that is centered on Entrepreneurial Identity Theory (EIT). According to the concept, digital literacy and platform use serve as stimuli for identity work (EIT), which is influenced by role expectations, legitimacy demands, and social norms based on SIT. As boundary conditions, structural elements like market institutions, mentoring, and resource availability explain a range of identity outcomes in various sociocultural situations. By integrating identity work into the socio-technical context of the tourist industry, this integration takes EIT beyond the individual level and provides verifiable connections between digital capabilities, identity change, and strategic behavior under varying social norms.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Identity Construction in Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial identity is a performative and dynamic process that is co-constructed by the entrepreneur via their interactions with the social, cultural, and commercial settings (Rae, 2005; Down & Warren, 2008). In particular, women in the tourism industry do "identity work," which entails constant balancing of cultural norms with business aspirations (Stead, 2017; Eddleston & Powell, 2008). In conventional tourism settings like homestays, artisan cooperatives, and community-led projects, entrenched roles as caretakers, cultural guardians, or community mediators have an impact on identity performance in addition to the enterprise (Mazonde, 2016; Trupp, 2015). The idea that an entrepreneurial identity must be viewed as existing at the nexus of the self and the surrounding social sphere is further supported by this.

Market-facing digital environments complicate this identity work. In this context, women are frequently required to strategically curate their public identities and engage in self-branding (Sigala, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015). Online exposure and social media participation, for example, can be viewed as extensions of entrepreneurial legitimacy, but they also create emotional labour and pressure to adhere to particular gendered standards of professionalism, communication, and attractiveness (Braun, 2022). Therefore, identity work in tourism business involves active negotiation, adaptation, and even resistance in addition to role acceptance.

2.2 Intersectionality and Role Theory

Analyses of women's identities in tourism enterprise cannot be isolated from broader social stratification. Gender, caste, class, age, and religion are just a few of the identities that interact to create distinct experiences of access, authority, and agency (Gurung, 2018; Sadaf, 2024). This is examined via the critical lens of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, in South Asian tourist environments, patriarchal structures and caste still influence which women enter the business world and under what circumstances (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016a; Yaja et al., 2023). Although digital inclusion may create new avenues for agency, it does not remove the systemic injustices that have long been in place and limit women's choices and self-perceptions.

This viewpoint is enhanced by role theory, which emphasizes the connections between business goals and socially defined roles like mother, wife, daughter, or community leader. Particularly in patriarchal settings, the conflict between entrepreneurial self-construction and normative role expectations frequently leads to conflicted identities or role overload (Mazonde, 2016; Marlow & McAdam, 2015). Furthermore, although being praised for their tenacity, women entrepreneurs are nevertheless limited by the very systems that

demand it (Stead, 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to conceptualize these multi-layered identities as mutually constitutive frameworks that shape the potential and constraints of entrepreneurial action rather than merely as additive categories. The conceptual framework for comprehending women entrepreneurs as socially rooted persons whose identity work is conditioned by both opportunity and constraint is provided by identity theory, intersectionality, and role theory taken together.

3. DIGITAL LITERACY AND THE GENDERED DIGITAL DIVIDE

In the tourism industry, digital literacy which includes not only the practical use of digital tools but also the strategic, critical, and communicative skills required for meaningful engagement is becoming more widely acknowledged as a fundamental enabler of entrepreneurial agency (Hamid et al., 2020; Srivastva, 2023). Digital literacy for women entrepreneurs, particularly those operating in rural or informal economies, typically starts with the use of a mobile phone, but it may also expand to encompass e-commerce, digital marketing, and involvement in financial ecosystems (Hasan et al., 2023; Sowmya & Pai, 2024). However, inclusion is not guaranteed by having access to digital resources alone.

The idea of the gendered digital gap provides a crucial perspective for comprehending why, despite their growing accessibility, women's adoption and use of digital technologies frequently remain restricted. This divide is defined by Antonio and Tuffley (2014) as a systemic difference between men's and women's access to, use of, and benefits from digital technology, which is made worse by structural injustices such as sociocultural norms, limited mobility, and educational gaps. In South Asian contexts, patriarchal constraints over device access, internet usage, and public exposure have molded this disparity, which is not just technological but also strongly gendered (Gurung, 2018; Sadaf, 2024). Although many women possess mobile phones, research indicates that family dynamics and cultural expectations frequently act as a mediating factor in their control over usage, content, and privacy (Hilbert, 2011).

Further impediments to women's full entrepreneurial engagement are second-level digital inequalities, which pertain to digital skills, confidence, and self-perception (Acilar & Saebo, 2023). Strong evidence from grassroots interventions where digital literacy training resulted in revolutionary changes in rural women entrepreneurs' self-confidence and financial independence is shown by Bhatt (2023) and Debbarma & Chinnadurai (2023). However, in the absence of ongoing mentorship, ecosystem support, and structural change, these advances remain brittle. Therefore, it is necessary to conceptualize digital inclusion as a multi-layered process that includes not just access but also expertise, autonomy, and the capacity to transform digital tools into significant entrepreneurial outcomes.

4. TOURISM AS A SITE FOR IDENTITY NEGOTIATION

In the unique setting of tourism business, identity is not only enacted but also strategically explained and challenged. Unlike other economic sectors, tourism is closely linked to place-making, narrative, and cultural performance, all of which present potential and challenges for women entrepreneurs (Trupp, 2015; Haddad, 2013). In order to create entrepreneurial personas that appeal to consumer demands and social legitimacy, women utilize local knowledge, personal histories, and community identities when managing artisanal businesses, hosting guests in homestays, and leading cultural tours (Ahmad et al., 2024; Osman et al., 2009).

This identity formation is seldom trouble-free, though. On the one hand, women who run their companies while still taking care of their families frequently point to the flexibility, visibility, and creative freedom that tourism provides as empowering (Cakranegara & Hendrayani, 2022; Yaja et al., 2023). Conversely,

the industry enforces commercial standards of professionalism, branding, and customer-focused service that could be at odds with gender norms or local beliefs (Khoo et al., 2024). For instance, market demands that reward assertiveness, digital involvement, and constant exposure frequently conflict with traditional expectations of modesty and family responsibilities for women entrepreneurs (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016a).

Because of this contradiction, the tourism industry is a particularly rich venue for identity negotiation, where women are redefining gendered subjectivities in addition to facing business risks. Managing conflicts between what the market values and what their communities demand is part of their identity job. It also demonstrates how empowerment is frequently a negotiated, incomplete, and socially acceptable concept. Therefore, it is necessary to consider tourist entrepreneurship as a place of cultural negotiation, performative labour, and gendered change in addition to analyzing it only via economic criteria.

5. DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND ENTREPRENEURIAL IDENTITY

Women's professional identity construction and projection have changed dramatically as a result of the tourism industry's increasing reliance on digital media. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and regional listing services have become centers of exposure, branding, and customer interaction for a large number of women entrepreneurs, particularly those engaged in home-based or informal tourist businesses. These platforms are essential to how entrepreneurial identity is managed, told, and acted in the public arena; they are not just instruments for company outreach.

Digital identity-building may encompass anything from simple mobile-based transactions to complex online self-presentation techniques that use branding, narrative, and symbolic visual signals, as Srivastva (2023) points out. What Duffy and Hund (2015) refer to as the "calculated authenticity" of the entrepreneurial self is introduced by the carefully calibrated character of such digital engagement. Although this exposure may encourage women entrepreneurs, it also exposes them to online threats, criticism, and new types of surveillance. Traditional gender standards are frequently exacerbated by the need to seem competent, elegant, and current online, particularly in patriarchal nations where women's public presence is controlled (Hilbert, 2011; Sadaf, 2024).

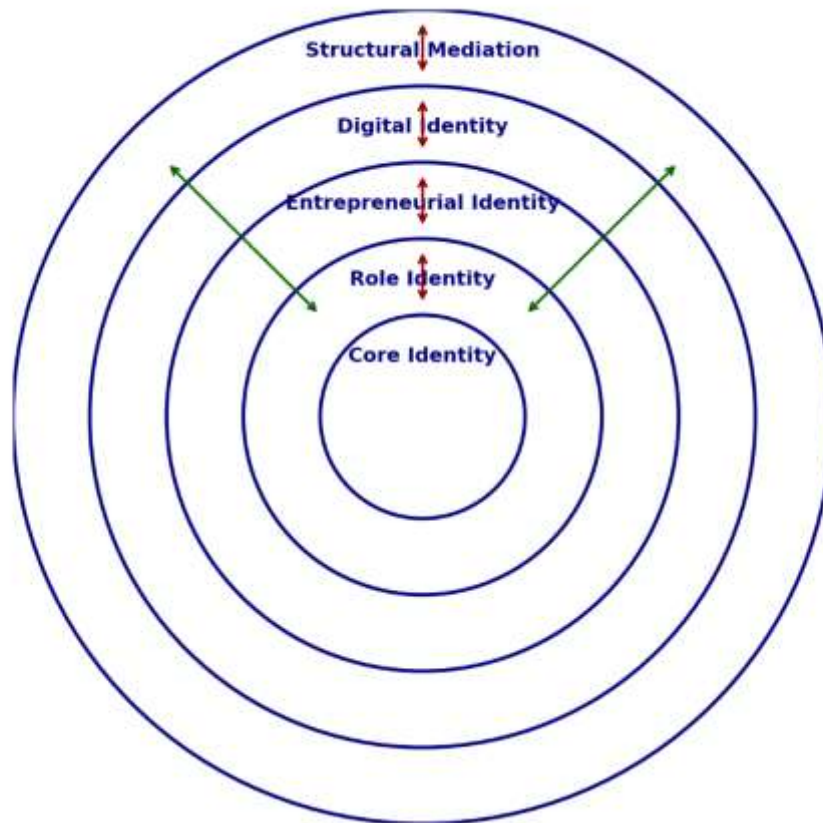
In this situation, the idea of identity fluidity becomes crucial. Depending on the audience, platform, or demands of the moment, women frequently switch between the roles of online influencer, homemaker, community member, and entrepreneur (Gurung, 2018). Because digital performance necessitates continual labor and modification, this continuing negotiation may be both strategically and emotionally difficult. Furthermore, even if digital platforms provide entrepreneurs autonomy, they also put them at risk for overexposure, harm to their reputation, and platform dependency, especially when institutional controls are lacking.

6. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: A LAYERED MODEL OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

In order to understand how female tourist entrepreneurs create their identities, especially in environments that are mediated by digital media, this study suggests a multi-layered paradigm. Core identity, role identity, entrepreneurial identity, digital identity, and structural mediation are the five interrelated domains that make up the concept (Rae, 2005; Down & Warren, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991; Antonio & Tuffley, 2014). These domains are organized in layers, with institutional and structural contexts extending outward from personal values. The dynamic and cyclical character of identity work is reflected in the interactions and impacts between each layer (Eddleston & Powell, 2008; Stead, 2017; (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016b). The

paradigm emphasizes how women's entrepreneurial paths are shaped by a combination of personal objectives, societal roles, entrepreneurial activity, digital practices, and institutional settings, as seen in Figure 1. The approach emphasizes that identity is constantly negotiated across many spheres of social and technical life and is not static (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Khoo et al., 2024).

Figure 1. A layered conceptual framework of women's entrepreneurial identity in tourism



The model's core identity, which refers to a person's internalized values, goals, and sense of self, is at its center. This fundamental layer determines how one internalizes outside stimuli and informs their motives for entrepreneurship (Mazonde, 2016). This is surrounded by the layer of role identity, which encompasses gendered, sociocultural, and family norms. According to Gurung (2018) and Yadav et al. (2022), conventional positions frequently establish normative limits on appropriate conduct, which have an immediate impact on entrepreneurial agency.

Entrepreneurial identity is the third layer, which is shown through self-perception as a business actor, market participation, and innovation. This is influenced by external validation from colleagues, clients, and community members in addition to business procedures (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016b). The way entrepreneurs curate themselves on digital platforms is reflected in the fourth layer, which is digital identity. Women are using Facebook and WhatsApp more and more to increase their visibility and branding, as noted by Srivastva (2023) and Hamid et al. (2020). However, this also creates pressure on women to perform professionally and adhere to platform aesthetics while being watched and vulnerable (Hilbert, 2011). The outermost layer is structural mediation, which includes policy contexts, digital infrastructure, financial inclusion, and institutional access. According to research by Sadaf (2024) and Sowmya and Pai (2024), having access to digital resources by itself is insufficient unless they are integrated into gender-sensitive support networks that allow for meaningful engagement.

Crucially, these levels of identity are not distinct. at a recursive interaction, opportunities or pressures at one layer can amplify, strengthen, or weaken dynamics in another. Women may be forced to strategically navigate or hide their online personas if, for example, their digitally managed business personality conflicts with family expectations (Gurung, 2018; Bhatt, 2023). On the other hand, encouraging structural settings could promote more consistency between levels, allowing women to portray more secure and self-assured business personas.

The model advanced in this paper does not purport to offer a universal framework, but rather serves as a conceptual heuristic and a generative tool to guide future empirical inquiry and inform context-sensitive policy design. It offers a lens through which the complex and often contradictory realities of women entrepreneurs in tourism can be understood where identity is not given, but continuously shaped by the interplay between structural forces and individual agency. Building on this, the framework invites future empirical application and testing. This conceptual paradigm helps analyze entrepreneurial identity as simultaneously digital, social, and placed; it is not a prescriptive framework. Future empirical studies are encouraged to examine how women mobilize, reconcile, or oppose various levels of identity in their entrepreneurial journeys across a range of tourism situations.

7. POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Both policy and practice are directly impacted by the proposed conceptual framework. First, it emphasizes how crucial it is to create gender-responsive digital literacy programs that include culturally appropriate instruction in financial instruments, e-commerce, and platform navigation in addition to device distribution. According to Bhatt (2023) and Debbarma and Chinnadurai (2023), community-level targeted digital upskilling has been successful in empowering rural women entrepreneurs to embrace mobile-based services and broaden their market reach. Second, it is evident that funding peer networks and mentorship in the community is necessary. Research by Mazonde (2016) and Yadav et al. (2022) emphasizes how interpersonal connections influence entrepreneurial confidence, particularly in settings with societal constraints. In order to assist women, resolve identity conflicts and affirm their hybrid business identities, mentorship mechanisms should be established.

Third, larger entrepreneurial support systems need to incorporate digital infrastructure and inclusive finance processes. According to Sowmya and Pai (2024), institutional support and integration with financial systems are important factors that facilitate digital inclusion. Digital empowerment initiatives run the danger of escalating already-existing disadvantages if infrastructure inequalities are not addressed. Because identity development, digital access, and economic involvement are intricately linked, policies targeting women's entrepreneurship in the tourism industry must be intersectional in nature. The ability of public initiatives to support women entrepreneurs' ongoing, independent identity negotiation should be assessed in addition to uptake measures.

8. CONCLUSION

By providing a layered model of entrepreneurial identity among women in the tourism industry, this research contributes conceptually by illustrating the complex and dynamic ways in which social roles, entrepreneurial methods, digital self-representations, personal values, and institutional restrictions come together. It advances a more sophisticated understanding of women's experiences in tourist entrepreneurship by incorporating ideas from the literature on identity theory, intersectionality, and digital inclusion. By doing this, it answers the demand for more integrative models that take into account the

lived reality of women entrepreneurs negotiating overlapping social and technical factors made by academics like Cardella et al. (2020) and Marlow and McAdam (2015). In addition to adding conceptual clarity, the suggested framework offers a heuristic tool for contextually anchored program assessment, gender-responsive policy formulation, and future empirical study.

In order to investigate the ways in which various identity layers interact over time, future research might operationalize the layered identity model in a variety of cultural and tourist contexts utilizing a combination of methodologies. Additionally, it might evaluate the ways in which digital platforms either support or impede women's independent entrepreneurship, particularly in developing nations where social and physical barriers still exist. Ultimately, a greater engagement with identity as lived, negotiated, and digitally mediated is necessary for the development of inclusive tourism, especially for women whose entrepreneurial trajectories are forged at the nexus of tradition, innovation, and desire.

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