



Navigating overlapping contexts through eclectic legitimation work: The lived experience of women digital entrepreneurs in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article explores the responses of women digital entrepreneurs to overlapping social and digital contexts whilst building legitimacy. Using qualitative empirical analysis of 21 in-depth interviews with women digital entrepreneurs in Nigeria, the findings reveal the complex process of legitimacy building. Far from reducing gendered structural barriers, the digital context overlaps with the social context. This overlap is characterised by paradoxical tensions and constraints. Women digital entrepreneurs respond to these by adopting different and multi-faceted legitimation practices, enacting what we propose to call eclectic legitimation work. This article makes two contributions to the understanding of women digital entrepreneurship: first, building on advances from the cyberfeminist perspective, we draw on paradox theory to reframe women digital entrepreneurship as inherently paradoxical in the way it is experienced and navigated by women in their everyday lives as digital entrepreneurs in overlapping contexts. Second, we engage with the under-explored aspect of legitimacy building in women's digital entrepreneurship revealing the different facets of legitimation work and the different sets of responses adopted by such women; this underpins our conceptualisation of the eclectic legitimation work they undertake to navigate these tensions and build legitimacy.

Keywords

women digital entrepreneurs, paradoxical tensions, digital entrepreneurship, eclectic legitimation work, overlapping contexts

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Introduction

While the advent of digital entrepreneurship has unlocked considerable participation and emancipatory potential for women in challenging institutional contexts (Kraus et al., 2018; McAdam et al., 2019), emerging cyberfeminist perspectives highlight that women's digital entrepreneurship often reproduces and can even exacerbate the gendered inequalities seen in more traditional experiences of entrepreneurship (Duffy and Hund, 2019; Martinez Dy et al., 2018; McAdam et al., 2020). Thus, while the ability to run a digital business from home opens up new opportunities, it may also overburden women with both household and business work, and undermine a healthy work-life balance (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Vershinina et al., 2022). Further, although the simplicity, informality and abundance of online resources can lower entry barriers, it can also prove overwhelming or costly to enact for many (Martinez Dy et al., 2018). Similarly, the promise of anonymity and control is also sometimes undermined by standard markers of privilege and disadvantage that can be reified and amplified online (Heizmann and Liu, 2022). These insights from a cyberfeminist perspective suggest that digital technologies have effectively added a new layer of complexity to traditional women's entrepreneurship in which new emancipatory promises are interlaced with exacerbated inequalities (Kelly and McAdam, 2025; Wiig et al., 2024). Thus, as studies of digital entrepreneurship continue to emerge, researchers have called for the more nuanced and sometimes overlooked aspects of digital entrepreneurship to be examined more carefully (McAdam et al., 2024). Against this backdrop, we identify two important gaps that warrant further investigation.

First, extant research has tended to privilege narratives of either new affordances and emancipation opportunities (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; McAdam et al., 2019; Wiig et al., 2024), or the new more complex constraints the cyberfeminist approach has revealed (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Martinez Dy et al., 2017; Vershinina et al., 2022). Yet, more recent research highlights that this duality of opportunities versus constraints is not representative of real-life experiences (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). Rather, the everyday experience of women digital entrepreneurs entails navigating co-existing, interdependent, and contradictory reality of affordances and disaffordances of digital technology (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Kelly and McAdam, 2023). Effectively, women's digital entrepreneurship can be said to be characterised by paradoxical tensions (Schad et al., 2016; Smith and Lewis, 2011). However, how women digital entrepreneurs navigate these paradoxical tensions remains under-explored.

Second, despite research highlighting the importance of understanding legitimacy building in context (Bunduchi et al., 2023, Riandita et al., 2022), how women entrepreneurs build legitimacy in the digital context requires further analysis (Imiren et al. 2024). Extant research on entrepreneurial legitimacy highlights that entrepreneurs are required to undertake nuanced legitimisation work to gain legitimacy from those who afford such credibility (Riandita et al., 2022; Rueede and Kreutzer, 2015); it also affirms that legitimacy is not peripheral, but central, to the experience of women digital entrepreneurs, fundamentally shaping how they are accepted, trusted, and recognised as *proper* entrepreneurs across platforms, communities, and institutional interfaces (Vershinina et al., 2022). Indeed, these diverse interrelated domains in which entrepreneurship is embedded are now considered important to understanding the role of context in entrepreneurship (Welter et al., 2017). The existing literature has however, yet to demonstrate how women entrepreneurs navigate the paradoxical tensions associated with women's digital entrepreneurship to build entrepreneurial legitimacy, particularly in challenging institutional contexts where the affordances and emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship must simultaneously contend with other complex constraints emanating from the multiple interacting contextual layers within which the women's digital entrepreneurship is embedded.

In this article, we address these gaps by investigating the paradoxical tensions women digital entrepreneurs in challenging institutional environments encounter and the responses they adopt to navigate these and build legitimacy. Specifically, we address the following research question: *how do women digital entrepreneurs in Nigeria navigate overlapping contextual constraints and tensions to build entrepreneurial legitimacy for themselves and their enterprises?* To investigate this question, we draw on in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with 21 women digital entrepreneurs in Nigeria. This context is highly relevant for the research gap highlighted as Nigeria has been identified both as an emerging leader of digital entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa (Zottel et al. 2023), and an environment where socio-cultural barriers continue to inhibit women entrepreneurship (Halkias et al., 2011; Mordi et al., 2010; Ojong et al., 2021). Our study contributes to the emerging cyberfeminist literature in women digital entrepreneurship (Duffy and Hund, 2019; Kelly and McAdam, 2023; Martinez Dy et al., 2018). It advances two key contributions. First, drawing on paradox theory (Schad et al., 2016; Smith and Lewis, 2011), to build on advances in the cyberfeminist debate. Here, we reframe women's digital entrepreneurship as inherently paradoxical in the way it is experienced and navigated by women in their everyday lives as digital entrepreneurs in overlapping contexts. Thus, the affordances may not be fully harnessed, but neither can the disaffordances and challenges of digital entrepreneurship in context be eliminated. Rather, they co-exist thereby engendering tensions that are paradoxical and persistent. Second, paradoxical tensions and constraints encountered by women digital entrepreneurs have entrepreneurial legitimacy implications in complex overlapping contexts. Yet, legitimacy building in women's digital entrepreneurship remains under-explored (Imiren et al., 2024). We contribute to the literature on legitimation work (O'Neil and Ucbasaran, 2016; Rueede and Kreutzer, 2015; Riandita et al., 2022), by revealing the different facets of legitimation work and the different sets of practices enacted by women digital entrepreneurs as responses to the complex constraints and tensions they face. We conceptualise this as eclectic legitimation work that women entrepreneurs undertake to navigate these constraints and tensions to build legitimacy. We begin below by revisiting the literature on the tensions that characterise women's digital entrepreneurship.

Theoretical background

Women's digital entrepreneurship: A cyberfeminist evaluation of promises and paradoxes

The advent and espousal of digital technologies by individuals to start and run new businesses online or support physical businesses digitally has transformed the practice of entrepreneurship, leading to digital entrepreneurship now being recognised as a new form of entrepreneurship (Carrier et al., 2004; Martinez Dy et al., 2017; Nambisan, 2017; Sussan and Acs, 2017). Digital entrepreneurship is often associated with low barriers to entry, opening up significant opportunities for participation in entrepreneurship by women and even serving as a route to empowerment (Martinez Dy et al., 2017, 2018; McAdam et al., 2019, 2020). In particular, for women in the Global South, digital entrepreneurship not only enables access to expansive markets and digital resources but also gives women protection and control over their identities and their work behind the screen, and more generally, the ability to avert gendered barriers that inhibit women's entrepreneurship in complex institutional contexts (Imiren et al., 2024; McAdam et al., 2019). These benefits are commonly conceptualised as digital affordances, defined as 'action possibilities offered by digital technology' (Nambisan, 2017: 1046), that provide 'an architecture of participation' (Nambisan, 2017: 1036). Effectively, digital affordances serve as tools that enable

women to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities beyond traditional contextual constraints (Autio et al., 2018; Nambisan, 2017; Wiig et al., 2024). Despite this promise, cyberfeminist critiques highlight that digital technologies and the digital context are not devoid of gender bias (Heizmann and Liu, 2022; Martinez Dy et al., 2018;). Rather, digital technologies may be characterised by disaffordances—situations where the technology fails to facilitate certain objectives of goal-oriented actors (Lin et al., 2022; Wut and Chan, 2025). Accordingly, digital spaces have been found to reproduce or exacerbate offline gender inequalities (Heizmann and Liu, 2022; McAdam et al., 2020).

While contradictory, the affordances and disaffordances are interdependent. This creates tensions that are inherently paradoxical in that they cannot be resolved. Existing research demonstrates this paradoxical nature in various ways. For example, studies that uncover the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship highlight how digital technologies are used in transforming lived realities which are otherwise constrained by restrictive social and cultural practices (McAdam et al., 2019). Here, digital affordances are highlighted as the main enabler of such transformation. However, while the same digital affordances enable emancipatory promises, they might be simultaneously exposing these women digital entrepreneurs to disaffordances, such as compulsory visibility and the reproduction of offline gender inequalities online (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; Martinez Dy et al., 2018). Similarly, Kelly and McAdam (2023) show how women entrepreneurs negotiate identities in liminal digital contexts imbued with uncertainty and ambivalence. They find that gender norms permeate the intimate structures of women's everyday lives and selves and create identity disaffordances that transform what should be a stable professional achievement into sites of perpetual liminality, characterised by ongoing inequality in recognition and legitimacy. Studies further indicate persistent credibility and legitimacy inequalities (Imiren et al., 2024), where women in male-dominated or technology-intensive sectors have their entrepreneurial competencies frequently questioned (Kelly and McAdam, 2023). The specific implication of the later is that while women digital entrepreneurship generally has to contend with the paradox of interdependent affordances and disaffordances, extant research has paid insufficient attention to legitimacy building itself as a paradoxical process embedded in women digital entrepreneurs everyday practices, wherein these entrepreneurs must simultaneously navigate contradictory demands. Here, three gaps are salient.

First, while digital technologies may afford agency by enabling opportunities to work from anywhere, blurring the traditional boundaries between work and personal life may also bring new burdens for women that research is required to unpack (Kelly and McAdam, 2022). Indeed, new digital opportunities may come with the pressure to work all the time to avail of the new unleashed entrepreneurial potential. Yet entrepreneurship and the household are traditionally inextricably intertwined with gender biases within households culturally enduring and known to influence entrepreneurial activity and outcomes in gendered ways (Carter et al., 2017; Mwaura and Carter, 2015). Extant research notes the significance of the interplay between households and entrepreneurial activity to be particularly acute in the Global South¹ (Xiong et al., 2018). Digital entrepreneurship may thus, exacerbate household tensions that women entrepreneurs have to contend with, particularly around the legitimacy afforded to these women as entrepreneurs. Second, while digital entrepreneurship is usually associated with low entry barriers, as no exacting qualifications are required to employ the technology and simple internal operations will usually suffice (Nambisan, 2017; Sussan and Acs, 2017), critics find that women digital entrepreneurs face barriers in availing of this promise. Specifically, costly work is needed to legitimise their businesses and unlock these benefits (Martinez Dy et al., 2018). Third, digital entrepreneurship promises broader markets,

protection of individual privacy with markers of disadvantage hidden behind the screen, and greater control over branding and reputation. Yet, research finds significant inequalities in how various women digital entrepreneurs engage with and are received in the market and wider society (Heizmann and Liu, 2022; Martinez Dy et al., 2018).

While research has investigated how women digital entrepreneurs build legitimacy in the digital space (Imiren et al., 2024), a key implication of the complexity associated with digital entrepreneurship is that women digital entrepreneurs will face entrepreneurial legitimacy constraints on multiple fronts. Little is known, however, about how women digital entrepreneurs, especially in challenging institutional contexts in the Global South, navigate the various overlapping contextual constraints and the pertinent paradoxical tensions to build entrepreneurial legitimacy for themselves and their enterprises. The concept of legitimation work provides a useful avenue to address this gap.

Legitimation work in digital entrepreneurship

Legitimacy in entrepreneurship research is widely understood as ‘a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions’ (Suchman, 1995: 574). Legitimacy is important for attracting financial, social, and symbolic resources as it is ‘a condition reflecting cultural alignment, normative support, or consonance with relevant rules or laws’ (Scott, 1995: 45). Therefore, besides being a socio-cognitive perception or evaluation, legitimacy can itself be conceptualised as a resource that is conferred by given stakeholders, but one that can also be interactively constructed (Suddaby, et al., 2017). From this latter perspective, legitimation work has been conceptualised as a collection of proactive and purposeful actions that entrepreneurs undertake to gain legitimacy from the conferrer of the legitimacy thus desired (Riandita et al., 2022; Rueede and Kreutzer, 2015; Suddaby et al., 2017). Legitimation work is important for digital entrepreneurs to be taken seriously, gain trust and access resources (McAdam, et al., 2019; Überbacher, 2014). As a whole, legitimation work comprises particular legitimation practices, the latter being the observable and specific actions and strategies implemented and enacted to build legitimacy (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009b). In digital contexts, aspects of this legitimation work are undertaken through practices and strategies similar to some offline ones, such as signalling competence through certifications, performance evidence, and endorsements (Tornikoski and Newbert, 2007). Other legitimation practices include digital shielding, digital networking, digital curating (Imiren et al., 2024), and generally the active management of algorithmically mediated visibility through which entrepreneurs build legitimacy (Navis and Glynn, 2011; Pollock et al., 2023). Importantly, digital entrepreneurship does not happen purely in the digital space (Kraus et al., 2018). Rather, digital entrepreneurs operate in overlapping digital, institutional, and social contexts (Imiren et al., 2024; Nambisan, 2017). In turn, legitimacy building in digital entrepreneurship is embedded within the broader social and institutional context in which the digital entrepreneur operates. Research has, however, yet to illuminate the complex legitimation work digital entrepreneurs undertake to navigate both the overlapping contexts and the paradoxical tensions within them.

Theorising overlapping contexts and tensions: A paradox lens

The notion of overlapping contexts builds on Welter’s (2011: 167) omnibus approach to context. Welter (2011) distinguishes between the variable-based approach, which isolates discrete contextual dimensions, and the omnibus approach, which highlights the multiplicity of overlapping

contexts, defined as the diverse interrelated domains in which entrepreneurship is embedded (see also Johns, 2006). The omnibus approach to context provides a framework to explore how digital and offline environments intertwine to influence entrepreneurial practice (Nambisan, 2017). Further, beyond seeing digital technologies merely as operational efficiency tools, recognising the digital context as a part of the omnibus context broadens our understanding of constraints, opportunities and conditions that shape and impact entrepreneurial outcomes (Welter, 2011). Importantly, within the omnibus approach, the broader framing illustrates not only *where* and *when* entrepreneurship occurs but also *who* the entrepreneur is. At the individual level, this perspective intersects with the notion of life course (Welter et al., 2017), which is particularly relevant for understanding women entrepreneurs and women-owned businesses. Indeed, life course dynamics ‘have an impact on the characteristics of women-owned firms and shape their development paths and strategies as well as the resources available to them’ (Welter et al., 2017: 315). The omnibus approach to context thus offers an avenue for unpacking the overlapping, often paradoxical conditions under which women entrepreneurs operate.

Simultaneously, as previously discussed, critical perspectives on women’s digital entrepreneurship have highlighted the promises and paradoxes that characterise women’s digital entrepreneurship (McAdam et al., 2019, 2020;). Paradox theory (Schad et al., 2016; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Smith and Tracey, 2016) offers a useful lens to explore how women digital entrepreneurs navigate problematic tensions embedded within contexts that are both complex and multilevel. Smith and Lewis, (2011: 382) define paradox as ‘contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time’, and can thus not be eliminated or fully resolved. Paradoxes have two components: ‘(1) underlying tensions—that is, elements that seem logical individually but inconsistent and even absurd when juxtaposed—and (2) responses that embrace tensions simultaneously’ (Smith and Lewis, 2011: 382).

It is this paradoxical nature of the tensions that makes them impervious to resolution (Schad et al., 2016). Paradoxical tensions can also happen across multiple contexts and levels, and are integral to complex systems (Schad et al., 2016; Smith and Lewis, 2011), both within organisations and at the institutional level (Smith and Tracey, 2016; Schad et al., 2016). This aligns with the omnibus approach to context (Welter et al., 2017), thus making the paradox lens a useful way to explore how women digital entrepreneurs navigate overlapping contextual constraints and the paradoxical tensions therein. Importantly, paradox theory postulates that since paradoxical tensions cannot be eliminated or resolved, how agents respond to paradoxical tensions highly influences the outcomes thereof. Defensive responses can trigger a vicious cycle ending in negative outcomes, while managing paradoxical tensions via dynamic and purposeful strategies can foster positive and sustainable outcomes (Schad et al., 2016; Smith and Lewis, 2011).

While most studies that employ paradox theory in management focus on standard organisational outcomes such as innovation, ambidexterity and firm performance, business legitimacy has also been identified as an important outcome to understand using the paradox lens (Chowdhury et al., 2021; Haack and Rasche, 2021; Scherer et al., 2013). These studies show that organisations can respond to heterogeneous legitimacy demands by pragmatically employing seemingly contradictory strategies in a both/and approach, enabling them to achieve or preserve legitimacy from multiple sources. Although this emerging literature in organisation theory demonstrates the relevance of paradox theory in understanding legitimisation work, there has been little application of paradox theory in research on entrepreneurial legitimacy, particularly for women digital entrepreneurs. Thus, notwithstanding the recognition that women digital entrepreneurs in the Global South operate in contexts layered with overlapping constraints and tensions, little is known about how women digital entrepreneurs navigate these paradoxes to build entrepreneurial legitimacy.

Methodology

Context of the study

We examine the entrepreneurial legitimacy building experiences of women digital entrepreneurs within their institutional settings, where social norms and digital contexts intersect in complex ways. Nigeria is a suitable empirical setting to explore this as a rapidly growing digital economy, identified as an emerging leader of digital entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa (Zottel et al., 2023). Research also suggests that socio-cultural structures, religious beliefs, cultural norms, and regulatory structures in Nigeria continue to inhibit women entrepreneurship in the country (Imiren et al., 2024; Mordi et al. 2010; Ojong et al., 2021). Pertinently, Nigeria is a patrilineal multiethnic context where gendered norms frames women's roles as secondary and supportive (Ituma and Simpson, 2009). Indeed, women's participation in entrepreneurship is culturally constrained even in traditionally entrepreneurial communities (Ituma and Simpson, 2009; Mordi et al., 2010). Prevailing societal perception of digital business models as untrustworthy, particularly as platforms are less regulated (Lixi et al., 2019), impose further constraints on women digital entrepreneurs. Moreover, the need for digital visibility and self-promotion online conflicts with societal expectations to be modest and subservient. Altogether, societal expectations about the roles of women and the underdeveloped regulatory and institutional system underpinning digital entrepreneurship continue to constrain women digital entrepreneurs in Nigeria despite the opportunity Nigeria's leadership in the development of digital entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa presents.

Methodological approach

To understand the nuanced experience and realities of legitimacy building in the rich and diverse context of Nigeria, this study takes a phenomenological approach (Cresswell, 2012; Rubin and Rubin, 2011). The aim is to understand the experiential narratives by capturing in-depth nuances and tensions, and uncover under-illuminated aspects of the entrepreneurial experience of women digital entrepreneurs. In-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted to collect the data. They were analysed using the Colaizzi (1978) method to navigate the description vs interpretation space, allowing us to understand both the direct experience of the entrepreneurs and the contextual elements that could be interpreted to form the basis of an emerging theoretical framework. Participating entrepreneurs 'who have experienced the phenomenon' (Cresswell, 2012: 61), that is, women entrepreneurs who operate in digital business in Nigeria, were identified by the lead researcher, through a purposeful participation selection strategy as they offered rich, relevant information pertinent to the study. Participants were recruited in line with extant sampling approaches in qualitative studies (Lassalle and Shaw, 2021). An inclusion criteria focused on participants who had experienced digital engagement, such as using virtual platforms (Helms and Raiszadeh, 2002), for entrepreneurial activities with their stakeholders (e.g. customers or suppliers) within 12 months prior to the interview (Marlow and McAdam, 2015). Given the study is interested in the experiences of entrepreneurs in digital context, participants were identified and contacted through web searches on LinkedIn, Google and Twitter. Over 30 participants who identified themselves as digital entrepreneurs on their profiles on virtual platforms, social media, and emails were contacted and 21 were eventually interviewed. Interviews took place between May and August 2019. Preliminary analysis was conducted in parallel and data collection ceased when no further novel themes appeared to be emerging from further interviews (Klag and Langley, 2013; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021).

Participants and data collection

Participants were women entrepreneurs operating digital businesses and self-identified as digital entrepreneurs online. Following invitations via email or LinkedIn, interviews were conducted online through the participant's preferred access medium including Skype, WhatsApp, Zoom or Facebook video or audio calls. Enabling participants to choose their preferred medium fostered rapport between the participants and researcher (Jones, 2019). The use of online interviews was effective for accessing geographically dispersed participants. Of course, using online interviewing has some limitations including potential loss of non-verbal cues and limited rapport-building opportunities. These were mitigated through initial introductions during the recruitment process and active listening with follow-up questions to encourage depth during the interview. The average time per interview was 1 hour 45 minutes.

As seen in Table 1, participants operate across various sectors where digital business practices were enacted, ranging from retail, entertainment, travel, consulting, and training. Whilst one-third of the participants had further education abroad, those educated abroad had Masters (mostly from the UK, and some from Ghana) and all participants had at least a bachelor's degree.

Data analysis

The phenomenological underpinnings of the study facilitated an in-depth account of the personal experiences of the digital entrepreneurs. Further, it averted the critique of pure or naïve descriptions (Moustakas, 1994), as the study adopted an integration of meaning-making from data following Kelle (2014). Following this phenomenological approach, the data structure which captured the experience of the entrepreneurs was derived from empirical evidence (Cope, 2005; Steyaert, 1997). To enable the portrayal of the experiences of the digital entrepreneurs as described by the participants, the lead researcher engaged in reflexive bracketing by identifying and acknowledging their prior knowledge (through own experiences related to digital entrepreneurship) and assumptions brought to the study (Dowling et al., 2016). Whilst these experiences provided valuable motivation to the study, it was important to minimise their influence by ensuring participant narratives remained central to the analysis (Giorgi, 2007).

The coding process was guided by Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method, selected for its systematic approach to capturing and describing participants experience through seven steps as follows, and outlined in Figure 1: (1) read the transcript, (2) extract significant statements, (3) formulate meaning from significant statements, (4) cluster formulated meaning into themes, (5) integrate clustered meaning into descriptions of the phenomenon, (6) articulate an overarching description of the phenomenon, and, (7) return to participants to either conduct further interviews or confirm understanding developed by the researcher. This approach involved an initial phase to explore potential issues that could arise from data collection, as well as interrogating presuppositions, collecting lived experience descriptions and data transcription (Colaizzi, 1978). Following Pratt (2009), we distinguish between the coding process through which meanings were generated and the representational form used to communicate those meanings. In this study, the coding process was guided by Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method, which involves the seven steps above, moving from participants' significant statements to clustered themes that describe participant experiences. This process entails analytic judgement and abstraction whilst ensuring participant narratives remained central to the analysis (Giorgi, 2007).

Colaizzi (1978) emphasised the importance of rendering phenomenological themes accessible and meaningful to readers without prescribing representational formats. To enable us to fulfil this objective and render the coding process and progression of analysis transparent to readers, we

Table 1. Study participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Industry	Education
Uchechi	26–30	Single	Online Travel Agency	BSc (USA), MSc (UK)
Tolani	30–35	Single	Digital Media	BSc (NG)
Simi	26–30	Single	Online Fashion Retail	BSc (NG)
Remi	26–30	Single	Digital skills training	BSc (NG), MSc (UK)
Queen	20–25	Single	Digital Marketing Agency	BSc (NG)
Pelumi	31–35	Single	Online Cosmetic Retail	BSc (GHA), PGD (UK), MBA (UK)
Omotolani	35–40	Married with Children	Online Cosmetic Retail	BSc (NG)
Nonso	20–25	Single	Online Technical Support and Software Testing	BSc (NG)
Munirat	31–35	Married with Children	Digital Entertainment & News	BSc (NG)
Lutoni	31–35	Married with Children	Online Travel Agency	BSc (UK), MSc (UK)
Kayin	20–25	Single	Online Travel Agency	BSc (NG)
Jaiye	41–45	Single	App Developer & Mobile Solutions	LLB (NG)
Iniedo	26–30	Single	Online Fashion Retail and Training	BSc (NG)
Halima		Single	Digital Marketing/Online Media	BSc (NG)
Ganiyat	31–35	Single	Digital Marketing Agency	BSc (NG)
Fehintola	31–35	Single	Online Media	BSc (NG)
Eniola	35–40	Single	Digital skills training	BSc (NG)
Deola	31–35	Married with Children	Online Baby Care Retail and PR Consulting	BSc (NG)
Chioma	41–45	Married with Children	Online Food Retail	BSc (NG)
Bolu	26–30	Single	Digital Health Care	BSc (NG), MSc (UK)
Ada	41–45	Single	Digital Marketing/Branding Agency	BSc (NG), MSc (UK)

employed a hierarchical data structure as an organising figure (see Figure 2). As Langley and Abdallah (2011) note, such structures visually display the progression from participant descriptions to higher-order thematic categories. The Gioia et al. (2013) data structure is widely recognised, across various qualitative approaches, for its ability to render complex analysis transparent and traceable (Gehman et al., 2018). Specifically, it illuminates rather than obscures analytical processes, making it particularly valuable for communicating phenomenological findings to diverse audiences. Thus, consistent with Pratt (2009), the Gioia et al. (2013) data structure was used as a reporting and visualisation device to make the coding process visible, in a transparent and traceable manner. Crucially, its function was to provide a hierarchical representation of how we moved from significant statements to higher order themes and concepts following Colaizzi's (1978) seven steps. Thus, for purposes of clarity in reporting the findings, the data is displayed in a tabular format analogous to the first order, second order, and aggregate structure widely used in Gioia et al., (2013).

Figure 2 outlines the data analysis process followed building on Colaizzi (1978). The first step involved reading the transcript to begin the process of making sense of the data. In the second step, we returned to the transcripts to extract significant statements; these are phrases, quotes, sentences,

Application of the Colaizzi, (1978) phenomenological method

I: Reading of transcripts to develop an interpretive understanding and make meaning from them.

II: Extracting significant statements – illustrative quotes, phrases, sentences, description of own experiences made by participants.

III: Meanings were formulated from extracted statements employing creative insight and reflective interpretation to leap from participant statements, and organised as first order concepts comparable to Gioia et al., (2013).

IV: Formulated meanings were clustered into themes, and organised as second order concepts analogous to Gioia et al., (2013).

V: Themes were integrated into descriptive accounts portraying the experience of women digital entrepreneurs in building legitimacy, uncovering constraints and responses which were organised as third order concepts comparable to Gioia et al., (2013).

VI: The descriptive accounts from the integrated themes were interpreted to articulate an overarching account of the experience of women digital entrepreneurs in building legitimacy as the navigation of paradoxical tensions resulting in eclectic legitimation work.

VII: Returning to participants for either conducting further interviews or confirming understanding of the lead researcher.

Figure 1. Coding approach.

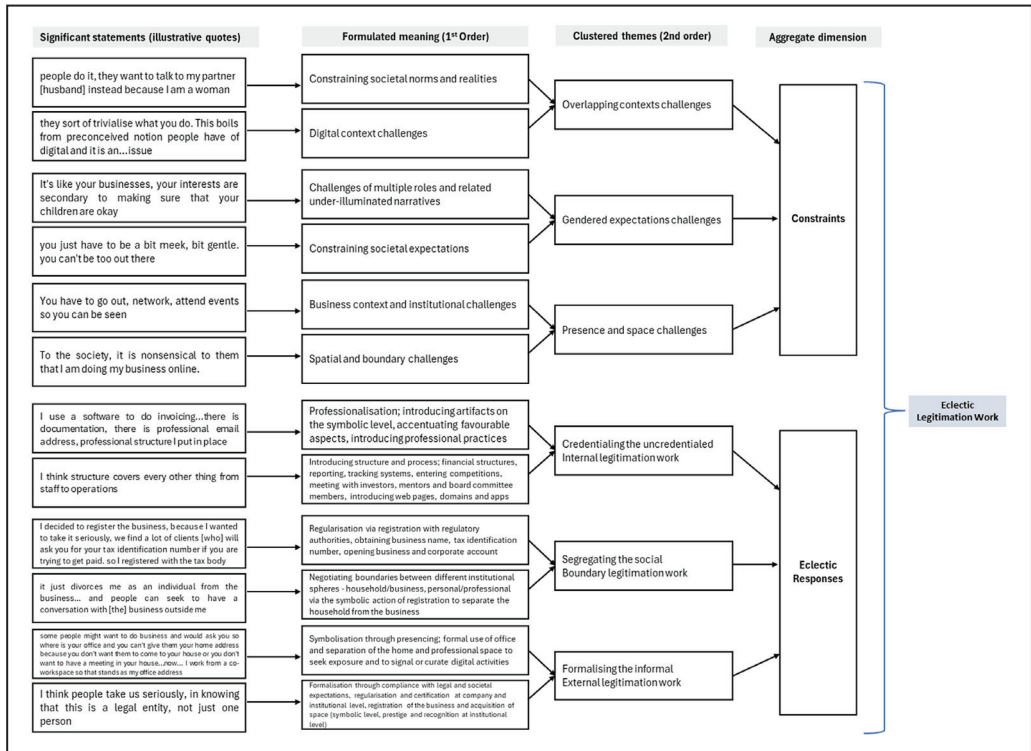


Figure 2. Data structure.

or paragraphs directly pertaining to the experience of building legitimacy. The significance of the statement is not in how many times it was said but in their capacity to illustrate the experience of the women digital entrepreneurs in terms of building legitimacy (Colaizzi, 1978; Englander, 2012; Sanders, 2003). This required reading each transcript at least twice, the first reading outlining the women’s overall experiences as digital entrepreneurs, with the second reading specifically attending to descriptions of legitimacy building experiences.

Significant statements were subsequently extracted into a word document, then transferred to an excel spreadsheet for organising and coding (Boyatzis, 1998). Each statement was coded with the participants’ assigned pseudonym and document number for traceability, for example ‘Eniola, D27’. This approach ensured a transparent audit trail from transcripts to analysis. From 21 participant interviews, a total of 710 significant statements were extracted. These statements varied in length, reflecting diverse ways participants articulated their experiences. Illustrative significant statements include: ‘People. . .want to talk to my partner [husband] instead because I am a woman’ (Chiomu, D9); ‘They wanted a man . . .instead of a woman. . .’ (Eniola, D7); ‘They ask why am I building websites. . .women are not supposed to do these things. . .’ (Halima, D37); ‘I put in some sort of structure, I do things in such a way that a company would do. . .’ (Nonso, D17); ‘I think structure covers every other thing from staff to operations’ (Pelumi, D17); ‘I use a software to do invoicing . . . there is professional email address, professional structure I put in place. . .’ (Nonso, D17).

In the third step, meanings were formulated from significant statements (Colaizzi, 1978). This interpretive process transformed participants everyday descriptions into disciplinary constructs

Table 2. Formulated meaning illustration.

Significant statements (illustrative quotes)	Formulated meaning (first order)
I put in some sort of structure, I do things in such a way that a company would do	Professionalisation; introducing professional practices, introducing artefacts on the symbolic level, accentuating favourable aspects
I think structure covers every other thing from staff to operations	Professionalisation; introducing artefacts on the symbolic level, accentuating favourable aspects, introducing professional practices
I use a software to do invoicing. . .there is invoicing software, there is documentation, there is professional email address, professional structure I put in place	Professionalisation; introducing structure and process, introducing professional practices, introducing artefacts on the symbolic level

(Giorgi, 1997) relevant to entrepreneurship research. This facilitated conceptual translations (Sanders, 2003), that moved from the descriptive to the analytical whilst keeping interpretations anchored in participant descriptions (Colaizzi, 1978). Each significant statement was considered in context to ask what it revealed about building legitimacy and interpreted to articulate what it signified about the experience of building legitimacy. This transformed participant descriptions into analytical interpretation whilst remaining anchored in participant accounts (Colaizzi, 1978). For example, Nonso's account of putting in place 'professional structure' was interpreted as having reflected the introduction of professional practices aimed at professionalisation. Such interpretations remained closely anchored in participants' own descriptions while revealing the significance of the experience of putting structures in place to build legitimacy. Formulated meanings were organised as first-order concepts, comparable to Gioia et al., (2013), creating a transparent bridge between raw data and interpretation. Table 2 demonstrates this process, showing how significant statements were transformed into formulated meanings that capture the experience of women digital entrepreneurs in building legitimacy.

In the fourth step, formulated meanings were clustered into themes through interpretive decisions to articulate emergent relationships (Cope, 2005; Hycner, 1985; Sanders, 2003), thus formulated meanings were compared and grouped into thematic clusters. The idea of organising the thematic clusters as second-order concepts is analogous to Gioia et al., (2013) as shown in Table 3. In the fifth step, clustered meanings were integrated into aggregate descriptive accounts which portray the experience of women digital entrepreneurs in building legitimacy, uncovering constraints and responses. Organising the clustered meanings as third-order concepts (aggregate dimensions) is also comparable to Gioia et al., (2013), as shown in Figure 2.

The sixth step interpreted these aggregate dimensions to articulate an overarching account of the experience of women digital entrepreneurs in building legitimacy. Extensive analytic discussions among the research team (Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2021) facilitated the integration of clustered themes into a coherent account of the experience of women digital entrepreneurs, revealing legitimacy building as entailing *eclectic* legitimation work. This work is characterised by navigating paradoxical tensions arising from constraints, through diverse combination of practices across three interrelated facets of legitimation work—internal, boundary and external (Figure 2). Rather than focusing on a single facet or resolving tensions, women digital entrepreneurs simultaneously draw on multiple practices (professionalisation, regularisation, symbolisation) to respond to normative expectations within overlapping social, institutional, and digital contexts. These eclectic responses reflect adaptive navigation of paradoxical tensions rather than attempts to resolve them.

Table 3. Clustered themes illustration.

Significant statements (illustrative quotes)	Formulated meaning (first order)	Clustered themes (second order)
I put in some sort of structure, I do things in such a way that a company would do	Professionalisation; introducing professional practices, introducing artefacts on the symbolic level, accentuating favourable aspects	Credentialing the uncredentialed internal legitimacy work
I think structure covers every other thing from staff to operations	Professionalisation; introducing artefacts on the symbolic level, accentuating favourable aspects, introducing professional practices	
I use a software to do invoicing . . . there is invoicing software, there is documentation, there is professional email address, professional structure I put in place	Professionalisation; introducing structure and process, introducing professional practices, introducing artefacts on the symbolic level	

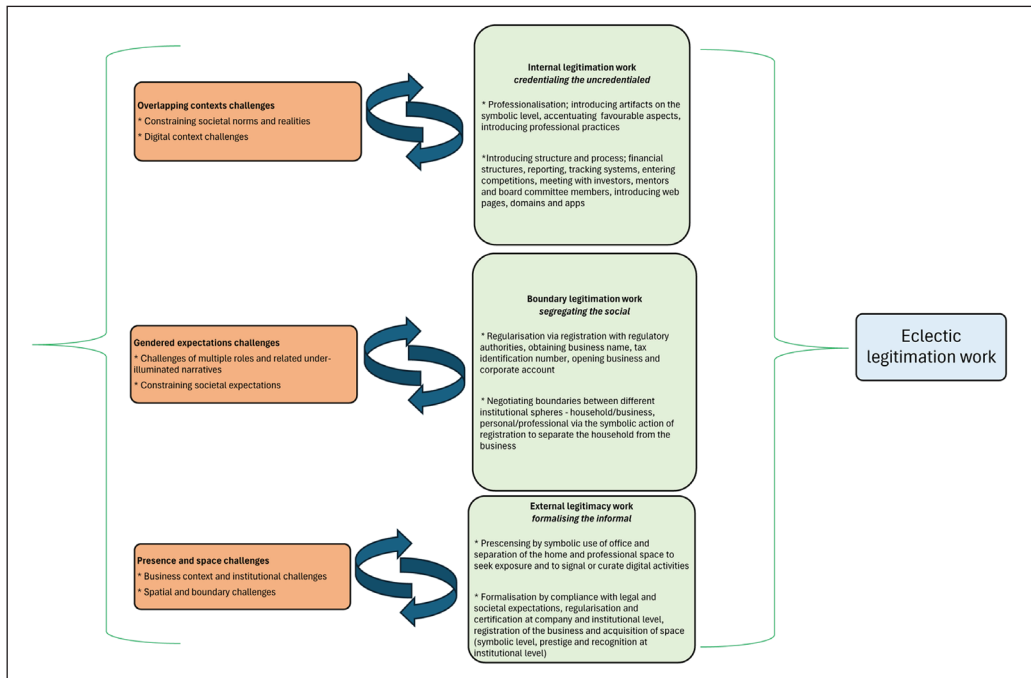


Figure 3. Navigating tensions of contextual complexities through eclectic legitimacy work.

Following Klag and Langley (2013), extant literature was used to inform our interpretation as we returned to theory following the emergence of the two main aggregate themes. This led to a higher level of theorisation under the emerging concept of eclectic legitimacy work. The presentation of constraints, tensions, eclectic responses, and facets of legitimacy work follow in the findings section and Figure 3. Finally, in the seventh step, we returned to the participants with a

summary of the themes emerging from the data. Participants checked that their own experiences were represented (Morrow et al., 2015), thus strengthening the credibility of the analysis.

Findings

Our analysis reveals that legitimacy building for women digital entrepreneurs is shaped by contradictory co-existence of informality and credentialing, blurred household and business boundaries, and digital informality alongside the need for formal recognition. These paradoxical tensions trigger eclectic responses of credentialing, segregating and formalising. We later build on these insights in the discussion to theorise the navigation of such paradoxical tensions through facets of legitimation work (internal, boundary and external legitimation work) to uncover how women digital entrepreneurs sometimes combine competing practices in navigating tensions rather than resolving them.

Societal expectations, women's digital entrepreneurship and legitimacy: paradoxical tensions

Informality and credentialing. The first paradoxical tension stemmed from the societal perception that the businesses of women digital entrepreneurs were not serious businesses. In Nigeria, societal expectations framed women as dependent on men, undermining recognition of their entrepreneurial activities. This creates legitimacy challenges. Participants described how women in Nigeria are expected to display feminine traits of being meek and gentle, discouraging overt assertiveness or visibility. Participants described experiencing internal struggles, precipitated by these societal gendered expectations, being seen as subservient and not been considered as professional entrepreneurs. As evidenced by Lutoni's experience, these societal expectations not only constrained their entrepreneurial activities but limited their full participation:

The culture of Yoruba in Nigeria, of a Nigerian Yoruba woman is so, you know, you just have to be a bit meek, bit gentle. you can't be too out there, you know, don't let them see you too much, see you finish. There's so many things that have been programmed into us that kind of hold us back as well. So after fighting that internal battle then you have to go out and fight those external ones. Where they are saying ah . . . are you sure you can do this? even when am pregnant, I was out with my second child . . . you will hear everybody saying sit down oh don't worry, just go home we will send you the minute of the meeting. . . (Lutoni, D9)

Relatedly, participants described their businesses as being treated as unnecessary or marginal, highlighting the societal expectation that financial provision should come from men. Participants attribute these expectations to lack of understanding in society about what digital entrepreneurs do, and barriers of scepticism and dismissiveness faced by these entrepreneurs; as Deola notes:

The society really doesn't want me to succeed . . . as a digital entrepreneur, you know why? . . . They can't understand it. . . They look at me like erm . . . are you not too young? . . . Sit down, take care of your baby, your husband will take care of you. . . (Deola, D10).

Participants described not being taken seriously, and experiencing attitudes that trivialise their entrepreneurial activities. Such perceptions compound prevailing assumptions that digital businesses, particularly those operated by women were informal side-hustles rather than legitimate businesses. This lack of recognition translates into struggles to garner respect for themselves and undermines legitimacy building to secure resources for their business.

But people just don't take you serious. So that's one bottleneck, trying to convince people that this is a business and not a joke . . . (Bolu, D8)

These experiences accentuate the paradoxical tension between informality and the need for credentialing: while the digital context offers flexibility and is thus, presumed to be informal and less demanding of credentials or physical markers of legitimacy, prevailing societal expectations undermine the legitimacy of women digital entrepreneurs, dismissing their businesses as unserious and less trustworthy hobbies.

Blurred household and business boundaries. The findings also show a second paradoxical tension emerging from how household expectations encroached on or directly undermined the legitimacy of women digital entrepreneurs. Participants described how their gender as women digital entrepreneurs had an impact upon the perception of legitimacy in instances where clients preferred to engage with a male partner of the entrepreneur, presuming the male to be the primary decision-maker due to traditional gender norms and societal expectations. As noted by Chioma:

people do it, they want to talk to my partner [husband] instead because I am a woman . . . and I sometimes use it to my advantage. So sometimes I will send a guy marketer because I know that those people have a problem with me. . . (Chioma, D9).

Family responsibilities subordinated the entrepreneur's interests to household priorities. In the Nigerian context, the experience of the participants further highlights the dynamics between the contextual constraints and legitimacy building for the entrepreneurs within the context of familial or household responsibilities. Such constraints, as described by Deola, highlight how household expectations positions digital entrepreneurship as secondary for these women.

He [husband] has had to travel out of the country with twelve hours' notice. If I had to travel in December, I must have known now o! So I can plan for who will take of my sons even if their father is around. . . It's like your businesses, your interests are secondary to making sure that your children are okay. But eh, that's the world we live in. . . (Deola, D10)

Participants further highlight not being taken seriously and describe being challenged about speaking authoritatively, despite possessing the necessary experience and skills qualifying them to comment on such matters. This illustrates lingering societal and gendered bias that undermine their legitimacy in a constraining patriarchal society.

I mean there are times when people have questioned my authority even though my experience gives me the authority to make statements about certain things . . . because ah you are just a woman making noise. . . (Uchechi, D9)

Participants also felt undervalued based on their gender and age. Such perceptions intersected with the stereotype of women's digital businesses as trivial undermining entrepreneur credibility, forcing them to navigate additional constraints in order to be considered legitimate.

apart from the fact that I am a woman, I look younger than my age, I have a small stature, people tend to underestimate me, people don't expect much from me but I kind of try to use that to my advantage. (Iniedo, D8).

Other participants recounted that their abilities and legitimacy were questioned. They were seen as being engaged in non-traditional entrepreneurial activities.

sometimes when they see me, they say ah ah Halima, you say you are building website, for what? are you a man, I am like can't a woman build a website? That challenge is there. . . (Halima, D37)

Managing the overlap between familial and entrepreneurial activity, social and digital life proved difficult, with the absence of a physically demarcated business workplace enabling frequent intrusions into designated business and work time, with family members encroaching on work time with requests for household assistance, thereby disrupting workflow and sustained focus required for core business activities. Such disruptions undermined the consistency and professionalism required for the legitimacy building efforts of the entrepreneur.

it's just that part of you being at home and working, they [family] don't know how to set that boundary between work time and so because you are home, they can call you to come and do one housework or the other, which sometimes eats into work time which was one of the reasons I really had to go look for a workspace. (Nonso, D14)

Furthermore, the paradoxical tensions emerge in household/familial relationships where the commitment of the women digital entrepreneurs was perceived as a neglect of household duties. Participants described experiencing relational tensions which constrained their legitimacy building efforts, such as between their entrepreneurial pursuit and their personal/household relationships, particularly with spouses who perceived that excess time was being devoted to the business.

he [husband] says that I spend too much attention on the business to the detriment of our own relationship . . . but we have to sell [to] the market! (Deola, D15)

Taken together, these experiences illustrate the paradoxical tension of household and business boundaries for women digital entrepreneurs. Whilst digital entrepreneurship requires a professional presence, legitimacy, and time; household and societal expectations constrain the legitimacy building activities of these women requiring them to simultaneously navigate contradictory roles with blurred boundaries.

Digital informality and formal recognition. The third paradoxical tension stemmed from the perception of digital entrepreneurship in Nigeria where societal norms favour visible businesses and physical legitimacy markers as opposed to the perceived informality of digital business. The surprise expressed by entrepreneur Eniola at experiencing such attitudes in contemporary Nigeria demonstrates the complexities women digital entrepreneurs face at the intersection of progressive ideals and entrenched gendered socio-cultural bias.

I got a call to facilitate a session at a program, and a company was sponsoring the event. So, the company that was sponsoring reached out to me that they wanted me to facilitate a session. We had talked and talked about how much they were going to pay me, only for them to come back and say that unfortunately we won't be able to move on, the association (for whom they were sponsoring the programme) said they wanted a man, because there were a lot of people coming for the event from the north and they were not comfortable having a woman lead them in a session. (Eniola, D7)

Whilst Eniola's digital presence and expertise were sufficient to secure engagement with stakeholders online, the online credibility did not translate into physical markers of legitimacy for

formal recognition offline. The subsequent preference for a male speaker highlighted legitimacy building as a navigation of progressive ideals and entrenched gendered socio-cultural bias. Thus, in physical formal settings, the digital entrepreneurs had their legitimacy as entrepreneurs contested in the absence of physical markers of formal recognition.

Participants described how their digital businesses were trivialised by expectations which viewed digital and self-owned businesses as minor and unimportant, even frivolous. As seen in Ada's quote, mistrust and misconceptions impose challenges of access to resources as the perceived lack of seriousness (imposed on the entrepreneur and their business) from the misconceptions associated with women doing digital business makes stakeholders question why much resources should be given to these entrepreneurs.

Some people feel like because you run your business . . . they [can] ask why your charges are so much . . . they sort of trivialise what you do. This boils from preconceived notion people have of digital and it is an . . . issue. (Ada, D4)

The women digital entrepreneurs in this study further describe experiencing broader societal doubts that digital businesses can be successful legitimate enterprises, stemming from societal expectations which emphasise the importance of having a physical presence to conduct business, network, and exhibit visibility as it relates to traditional business practices. These societal attitudes and expectations highlight scrutiny and scepticism for these women as their businesses are perceived to depart from conventional business norms, and thus, constrain the legitimacy of digital entrepreneurs in this context.

To their society, it is nonsensical to them that I am doing my business online. What do you mean online? You have to go out, network, attend events so you can be seen. (Deola, D10)

Taken together, the experiences of the participants highlight the paradoxical tension between digital informality and formal recognition. While the digital context offers flexibility and is thus, presumed to be informal and less demanding in terms of credentials or physical markers of legitimacy, societal expectations pressure women digital entrepreneurs to display physical, formal legitimacy markers questioning the legitimacy of digital-only entrepreneurial activities. These constraints do not exist in isolation but traverse the overlapping social and digital contexts to persistently challenge the legitimacy of women digital entrepreneurs. In the following section, we turn to the eclectic responses described by women digital entrepreneurs in navigating these constraints to their legitimacy building efforts.

Responses to legitimacy building challenges

Beyond the constraints above, participants also described actions and mechanisms used in navigating these societal norms and expectations. Our findings show that women digital entrepreneurs draw on a set of actions as strategies which in themselves can be symbolic or tangible to build legitimacy and to address the tensions occasioned by the complex interweaving of the digital and institutional contexts. The findings show that women digital entrepreneurs combine diverse responses in the process of building legitimacy and thus, engage in a process of eclectic legitimisation work, variously adopting credentialing, segregating, and formalising practices. Importantly, these responses did not resolve or reconcile the tensions as such; rather, they co-existed with constraints as antithetical experiences that the women had to balance, uncovering how women digital entrepreneurs navigate paradoxical tensions as opposed to resolving them. Thus, the responses

presented show how these digital entrepreneurs drawing on eclectic practices to emphasise the use of diverse set of ideas, resources and actions that are symbolic or tangible to create coherence and effectiveness suited to the complexities and constraints of their context.

Credentialing—emphasising professional credentials while operating in digital context supposedly less demanding of credentials. Participants described the deliberate introduction of structures and routines to enhance the appearance of their digital businesses as credible ventures. This selective professionalisation was undertaken to navigate the perceptions of informality and signal seriousness at both personal/familial and business levels; a paradoxical endeavour where they must simultaneously establish professional legitimacy while operating in digital contexts conventionally deemed open and inclusive with formal barriers absent. The paradoxical tension here is embedded in the notion that the digital context is celebrated for its low barrier entry; yet, women entrepreneurs must institute visible markers of legitimacy. This professionalisation strategy is calibrated to the industry context of the business as demonstrated in the various business descriptions articulated by the entrepreneurs – where they must balance the informal, accessible nature of the digital context with the formal signals of professional competence expected by stakeholders. Communication platforms such as social media, transaction platforms such as invoicing systems and hybrid platforms such as websites or apps which enable both presence and exchange to occur are used in the professionalisation strategy.

I put in some sort of structure, I do things in such a way that a company would do, for example, invoicing, I use a software to do invoicing . . . there is invoicing software, there is documentation, there is professional email address, professional structure I put in place. . .this is how it is done professionally. (Nonso, D17)

The participants emphasised the importance of putting in place structures eclectically by adopting formal tools, practices, or visible systems to separate the entrepreneur from the business. They described this as a deliberate internal step towards subsequent external formalisation. The symbolic actions and strategies covering staffing and everyday operations of their entrepreneurial endeavours highlights this approach to professionalisation, positioned as a way of projecting legitimacy beyond the presence of the founder as illustrated in Pelumi's experience:

I mean without structure in place, your business cannot exist without you. I think structure covers every other thing from staff to operations and all of that. (Pelumi, D17)

structure the business and just don't do it as a freestyle. (Pelumi, D38)

Many of the women digital entrepreneurs describe professionalisation as putting in place structures, or installing systems to track and store digital footprints such as customer emails, so they could build a relevant network to be taken seriously. As seen in the description from Iniedo, she 'freestyled a lot' at the start of the business which caused her to 'get overwhelmed' when 'getting a lot of orders' because she did not have a system for keeping and tracking customer emails or phone numbers. This not only lost her repeat business, but it also undermined her legitimacy.

I freestyled a lot . . . I didn't have structure from the beginning . . . when I started getting a lot of orders, I would get overwhelmed, I wasn't tracking anything, I didn't have . . . a place to keep my customer emails, I couldn't reach them on their phone numbers again. . . (Iniedo, D37)

Professionalisation took place in the digital context, where maintaining consistent and reliable online presence was described as central to building legitimacy. Participants also describe professionalisation as establishing professional profiles offline and online. This entails use of platforms of communications such as social media and messaging apps like WhatsApp to manage visibility and personal–professional boundaries; and transaction platforms to manage the business operations and structure, adopting practices that project competence. As communication platforms expose these entrepreneurs to heightened scrutiny as women, Pelumi’s quote highlights professionalisation as entailing consistency between the chosen attributes of the business that the entrepreneurs have decided to highlight in response to contextual expectations.

I think for most online digital businesses you have to make sure that your online presence or your online space is always up and running. especially in digital space, we have to make sure that your branding is consistent. your branding is consistent online, your domains, your hostings, your whatever app you use, for those that have app-based businesses, and also you also have to make sure that the operations, like your business operations are consistent, your products are consistent, so aside from structure, I think consistency too is important. (Pelumi, D20)

Participants further describe having a structure which includes mentors and guides, or boards of committee members as a professionalisation strategy, in order to prepare the entrepreneur to respond to the contextual challenges that will be encountered in building legitimacy. As Fehintola notes:

Have a structure, know what you are doing, get a board or committee or someone that can guide you, like a mentor, because you will get discouraged and distracted, you will feel the world is against you but it’s just a phase you need to pass through, so it’s just preparing yourself mentally else you will feel down and out when anything happens to you. (Fehintola, D38)

Such actions are important because unlike the western context where such advisory structures are present, in this context, there is a degree of co-creation between the entrepreneur, mentors and advisors within a more informal environment.

The process of demonstrating professionalism involves describing, articulating, or telling stories about the entrepreneurial endeavour, in ways which are characteristic of their own perceptions of themselves and the business:

I am a digital technology consultant, and when they say, what does that mean, I say basically I build websites for businesses, I do technical support, and I do software testing . . . when I say software testing, people say what exactly are you talking about, I say . . . I test the software to check that there are no bugs on it and that it meets the requirement of what it should do. that’s how I put it . . . with the hope that they understand. (Nonso, D12)

An example of the above as illustrated by Remi in participating and winning a business competition:

when I just started, everybody were like ah okay that your club that you are doing? you know, they never really took it seriously . . . I think it is was up until a time when we won an award. they didn’t take me seriously, they were like oh your little club . . . it wasn’t up until the time that we had to campaign for a nomination, so we were nominated for this award. . . (Remi, D12)

By also providing clear description of the financial structures and income generated from the business, the participant become more credible and legitimate in the eyes of stakeholders and

family members. As Jaiye notes, ‘they tend to rate your successes based on your financial, or what you are able to demonstrate financially’ because:

if you . . . are able to demonstrate a certain level of financial capacity, then they say you are doing something that makes sense. but if you are running a tech business where you have . . . two years . . . not generating funds, then they tend to look at that as not being a serious or sustainable endeavour. (Jaiye, D13)

The expectations of stakeholders and family members regarding business profitability show the lack of awareness of established business norms wherein profitability is rarely immediate and significant returns within the first two years of operation are often curtailed. This intensifies pressures on women digital entrepreneurs to demonstrate early financial returns as a means of credentialing their businesses.

The above actions, taken together highlight that women digital entrepreneurs engaged in selective professionalisation to legitimate a supposedly credential-free and informal context, forming part of the eclectic strategies developed in response to a multitude of contextual challenges and perceptions. Our findings show that women digital entrepreneurs use professional structures as a way of presenting and making visible attributes of the enterprise, which are usually taken for granted. These include symbolic actions and strategies taken in the everyday operations of the business, installing tracking systems, providing clear descriptions through competitions, websites, financial reporting and doing things ‘*in such a way that a company would*’, as a response to societal expectations of normal ways of conducting business. Although the entrepreneur is by proxy the symbol for the business, the entrepreneurs described experiences whereby they engaged in different symbolic actions to build legitimacy for their businesses and for themselves as entrepreneurs, by adopting practices and undertaking actions that would signal their profile and behaviour as ‘professional’.

Segregating—separating professional from social spheres. Our findings show that women digital entrepreneurs further navigate legitimacy building by separating personal and entrepreneurial activities to signal legitimacy. Participants described registration as a necessary first step to be taken seriously. The act of registering the digital business served as a symbolic proxy for building regulative legitimacy. Additionally, however, registration also functioned as a mechanism for establishing boundaries between social and professional domains, which are blurred in overlapping socio-digital contexts. Regularisation for these entrepreneurs transcended mere compliance; rather, it became a strategic and symbolic tool for demarcating the professional from the social. The inability to present these formal markers of segregation significantly undermines legitimacy building for these entrepreneurs.

it would not be taken seriously if you don’t register your business, like take for instance, if I am not registered, I would not have a business account and then I go into a company and tell them I want to supply them, then they ask me for my bank details and I give them my personal bank account, they will be like you are not serious yet, if you want to do business, company to company business, then you should have your business registered, because that would make you credible, it would give you some credibility in the market space. (Omotolani, D30)

Registering the business enables the entrepreneurs to separate further between the woman (the wife, the mother, the daughter) and the business person (the entrepreneur):

it just divorces me as an individual from the business . . . and people can seek to have a conversation with business outside me, the implication of that also is that when I’m not available the idea would be that the

business can continue because the business stands as an identity on its own I can second a freelancer or a staff will eventually engage to have conversations with clients in the name of the business, that cannot happen if I keep presenting the business as myself. (Deola, D30)

Specifically, registration was described as a prerequisite for accessing opportunities and contracts from larger businesses.

first of all, everybody wants to check that . . . you've been verified, you've been recognised, . . . you are a legitimate business, nobody just wants to part away with any [money if the business] isn't fully verifiable, so with the CAC and they have a way to identify you . . . knowing that you are a registered business gives some kind of credibility to what you do. (Remi, D30)

to be able to have a business account with the bank, you need a registered business and people cannot be sending money for a legit thing with your personal name on it, it has to be a business name on it, if you are going to be taken seriously. (Simi, D25)

They also project the business as a legal entity which is separate from the entrepreneur thereby building legitimacy of both the business and the entrepreneur:

I think people take us seriously, in knowing that this is a legal entity, not just one person. (Uchechi, D30)

Although many women digital entrepreneurs identified being able to operate without registering the business, others describe having to register with Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC), in Nigeria before they could enact their entrepreneurial endeavours.

So before you run a business in Nigeria, you register the business under the CAC. Corporate Affairs Commission, so we registered . . . and then we had founders, directors and then we had some product directors. (Bolu, D25)

I decided to register the business, because I wanted to take it seriously, we find a lot of clients will ask you for your tax identification number if you are trying to get paid. so I registered it with CAC and I also registered it with the tax body, FIRS. (Lutoni, D25)

Many of the participants experienced being encouraged or pushed by stakeholders' expectations to register their businesses:

To be fair, when I started I did not know so much about that [registering]. What I knew was that you can register your business and there is tax you have to pay . . . I just knew that as far as you register your business you are fine. Until I met my coach. He said, why don't you have a business account? So I had to get a business account. . . (Halima, D24)

By registering the business, the entrepreneur was able to start building a brand, with the business name, logo and register the business to be taken seriously. For most of the women digital entrepreneurs, registering the business was important to signal building regulatory legitimacy. In turn, this enabled the entrepreneurs to build trust in potential stakeholders. Still, some of the digital entrepreneurs described strategically choosing to delay business registration until it was necessitated by contextual complexities. For instance, where there was a need for the entrepreneur or the business to demonstrate the credentials to warrant conducting business with either the government or other businesses:

assurance, letting them know that this is a registered business and you know, you could trust us because someone is regulating whatever it is that we are trying to do and it gives them that peace of mind to work with us. (Bolu, D26)

number one that's how people can take you serious, I strongly believe that while it may have been okay for me to do business with an unregistered business, it gives my service more credibility and my prospective clients will take us more seriously because we have our documentation, we have a corporate bank account which only came to be because we had registered the business. (Deola, D26)

Whilst registering the business was not a compulsory first step legally, participants described it as a strategic step for growth and scaling. This reinforced the notion that registration functioned less as a regulatory requirement and more as a legitimacy building mechanism in the context of Nigeria. Taken together, these accounts show that regularisation through business registration were actions to segregate personal and business spheres thus, creating boundaries between these spheres. Importantly, in Nigeria, this often meant registering a trading name (akin to sole trader status in the United Kingdom) instead of forming a limited liability company; this is a symbolic indicator of institutional legitimacy.

Formalising—projecting external legitimacy markers at institutional level. Participants also described formalising their entrepreneurial activities by projecting external legitimacy markers at the institutional level through 'presencing'. As an agentic response to the disadvantage of absence, presencing entails purposive efforts to give markers of legitimacy real existence and 'true presence here and now' (Hoffmann, 2019: 31). Participants thus, described how they deliberately displayed visible signs of professionalism such as certifications. Further, while the option of working from anywhere exists, participants elected to work from physical offices, particularly formal business offices, using client offices, or co-working spaces. These served as physical anchors for their digital businesses, providing digital businesses with a manifest 'here and now' presence. Formalising in this way enabled the entrepreneurs to navigate between the informality and flexibility afforded by digital contexts and the simultaneous pressures of formal structures. For many participants, establishing or accessing workspaces was central to building legitimacy and multiple workspaces were used strategically to present the business as legitimate in different contexts. Thus, Halima notes:

The typical day where I am working from my office, I go to the office . . . The typical day at work where I am going to a client's office . . . I just go there. (Halima, D11)

Participants describe how expectations from society made them seek out physical working spaces to build legitimacy for the digital business. Use of office space encompasses home office, business office, client's office, or open spaces where the entrepreneur can work with a laptop. Of these workspaces, the business office provides the entrepreneurs with more legitimacy although the other forms of offices contribute to building legitimacy. Thus, the symbolic value of an external office was emphasised as a marker of legitimacy.

. . . an office space had not been my thing but in Nigeria, now some people might want to do business and would ask you so where is your office and you can't give them your home address because you don't want them to come to your house or you don't want to have a meeting in your house . . . now . . . I work from a co-workspace so that stands as my office address. (Nonso, D4)

The distinction between home and work is further achieved through physical symbols such as demarcating spaces in the home. Here, women digital entrepreneurs make concrete separations to

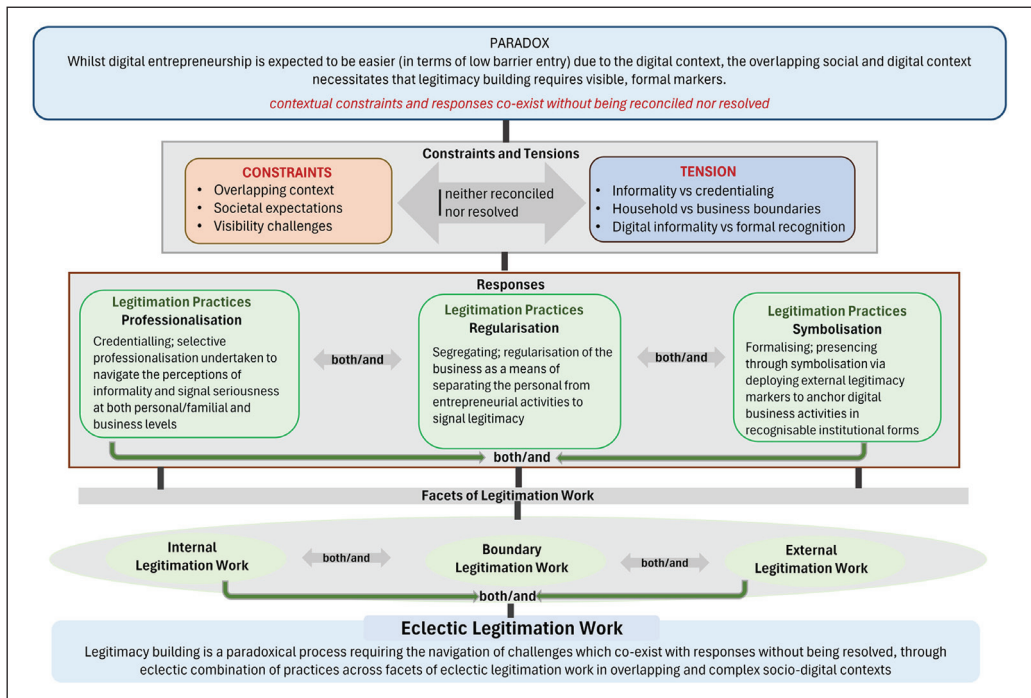


Figure 4. Women digital entrepreneurs’ eclectic legitimation work – a paradoxical tensions framework. (See online supplementary material for additional details.)

symbolically distance themselves from domestic work. Taken together, these actions show that women digital entrepreneurs engaged in presencing to signal professionalism. In so doing they engaged in formalising their entrepreneurial activities by projecting external legitimacy markers by generating visible signs of professionalism such certifications and offices in various forms including using a business office, using client offices, or using open spaces where the entrepreneur could work with a laptop; each served as a physical anchor for their digital businesses.

Discussion: Eclectic legitimation work

The findings reveal the complex processes of legitimacy building among women digital entrepreneurs in Nigeria. Far from reducing gendered structural barriers, the digital context overlaps with the social context, leading to a situation characterised by paradoxical tensions. Crucially, the constraints and tensions experienced in this context are neither reconciled not resolved. Rather, women digital entrepreneurs adopt different responses to build legitimacy. As seen in Figure 4, the findings reveal different facets of legitimation work, where participant are outlined; they constitute specific legitimation practices. We argue that these are employed in an eclectic fashion and together contribute to what we term eclectic legitimation work.

A paradoxical situation

Whilst the digital supposedly offers lower barriers to entry for women and should offer an environment free of the offline gendered constraints, we observe the prevalence of normative gendered

expectations within the online space that affect women digital entrepreneurship. This is a paradoxical situation, in the sense of Smith et al. (2017), where opposite logics (embedded offline space vs supposedly gendered neutral online space) conflict, affecting the actions of individual women entrepreneurs. Indeed, our findings highlight the persistent nature of systemic societal expectations on women in the digital context (Martinez Dy et al., 2017, 2018; McAdam et al., 2019). Whilst the low barriers to entry associated with digital entrepreneurship enable women to enter and operate businesses from home or hybrid spaces, physical gendered markers of legitimacy still matter; this affects their ability to build legitimacy and constrains their agency both offline and online (Imiren et al., 2024). The paradoxical tension here highlights that the digital context cannot be considered free of gendered discriminations and barriers. Rather, it illuminates the complex nature of overlapping social, institutional, and digital contexts (Welter, 2011), in which women digital entrepreneurs operate. It challenges views of the digital as a gender-neutral context. Instead, the digital is seen as just another context, in which societal and institutional norms (including gendered socialisations) often persist (Martinez Dy et al., 2017) or can even be exacerbated. Indeed, the new technology, or in this case, the use of digital technologies, adds another layer of context (Kelly and McAdam, 2023; Wiig et al., 2024). Here, the emancipatory promises of digital entrepreneurship are intertwined with the persistence of gendered norms and associated inequalities of access to resources, including legitimacy.

Such paradoxes create tensions which women digital entrepreneurs must navigate. The ability of women digital entrepreneurs to work through these tensions is crucial to the sustainability and success of their endeavour. The importance of responses to paradoxical tensions is a central tenet of paradox theory (Smith and Lewis, 2011), and emphasises the complexity (and the need) to address conflicting demands and expectations. In the case of women digital entrepreneurs, building an online visibility and legitimacy is particularly crucial to access customers and other resources (Imiren et al., 2024). Attempts to navigate these tensions do not assume an ability to change the system or the rules of the game (Krook and Mackay, 2011). Rather, it points to ability to work through these tensions at the individual, agentic level (Lassalle and Shaw, 2021). Thus, responding to calls to focus on the nexus between new digital technologies and entrepreneurial agency (Nambisan, 2017), our research aligns with cyberfeminist developments that highlight the agentic-level responses to existing, overlapping, and contradictory gendered realities in which women digital entrepreneurs operate (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Kelly and McAdam, 2023).

Constraints and tensions in overlapping contexts

Among the persistent constraints shaped by social biases and normative gendered expectations in the Nigerian society, tensions between family life and being a wife, mother, and the business life of being an entrepreneur, are particularly prevalent (Dinkelman and Ngai, 2022). The digital context is not a neutral context but is still gendered, as women face social, cultural, and institutional barriers in the digital space (McAdam et al., 2020). Thus, digital entrepreneurship requires women entrepreneurs to simultaneously navigate the digital, institutional, and social contexts, to be visible and to build legitimacy as entrepreneurs. Existing studies argue that digital entrepreneurs rarely build legitimacy in isolation from offline realities and from offline legitimacy markers (Imiren et al., 2024; Martinez Dy et al., 2017). Specifically, in institutional contexts characterised by less developed support frameworks (Best et al., 2024), and institutional complexities (Imiren et al., 2024), the gendered norms and expectations to be 'meek' and 'docile' in the offline world create internal tensions (about appropriate gender behaviour) that conflict with expectations to be assertive as an entrepreneur, particularly in the digital context where confident presentation and amplification of the self across digital platforms is required. Thus, the digital, institutional, and social

contexts are intertwined and overlapping (Welter, 2011). As these contexts remain gendered (Xheneti et al., 2019), women face multiple barriers to legitimacy based on gendered biases in society, including traditional gatekeeping mechanisms (e.g. in establishing business networks). These overlapping dimensions create specific conditions for entrepreneurs situated in these contexts (Lassalle and Shaw, 2021); as such, digital affordances stemming from the flexibility of the digital context appear to co-exist with disaffordances that reproduce offline inequalities (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024). These conditions influence women's responses as entrepreneurs operating in the digital context, necessitating different sets of overlapping and context-specific practices to be employed as responses. Importantly, the constraints and tensions are never fully reconciled nor resolved through the responses. Rather, they remain as persistent tensions that women entrepreneurs must persistently navigate.

Eclectic responses

Women digital entrepreneurs constantly navigate between these paradoxical demands through the different practices of credentialing, segregating between household and entrepreneurial life, and formalising their businesses. These legitimisation practices respond to the pressures and need for professionalisation, regularisation and symbolisation of the entrepreneurial context (see Figure 4). The professionalisation practice, through credentialling (see Findings) signals compliance and the quest for credibility for women digital entrepreneurs, who need to navigate the perceptions and prejudices associated both with the digital (informality, lack of 'seriousness') and being a woman, and therefore, a wife, mother before all. The regularisation responds to the need to segregate the business from personal life as a way to gain legitimacy. It is also a way for women digital entrepreneurs to avert cultural impositions and proscriptions. Finally, symbolisation, notably through presencing, enables women digital entrepreneurs to anchor their digital business activities into recognisable business practices and forms. By deploying and reinforcing institutional symbols such as physical (offline) presence of the business, women digital entrepreneurs formalise their digital businesses to accentuate tangible legitimacy markers. These three practices occur in parallel. Within each type of practices, women digital entrepreneurs react to contextual constraints and to structural tensions of the paradoxical situation, to which they adopt a set of eclectic responses. These responses are not solving the constraints and tensions, but are used to address the legitimacy building challenges which stem from the intertwined digital and social contexts.

Our study shows that women digital entrepreneurs do not favour one type of practice but instead actively navigate the paradoxical constraints and tensions by drawing on a collection and combination of proactive and purposeful actions (O'Neil and Ucbasaran, 2016). Adopting parallel and different responses and practices enable women digital entrepreneurs to respond to conflicting/competing demands and normative expectations of overlapping social, institutional and digital contexts. Entrepreneurs do not choose between mitigating the constraints and tensions of the digital context and conventional professional signalling. Instead, they integrate approaches to responses in a 'both/and' manner (Smith et al., 2017). Consistent with Smith and Lewis (2011), we advance the view that the paradox and tensions to which women digital entrepreneurs are subjected are both interdependent yet antithetical experiences which co-exist in persistent and unresolved manner to resist either/or solution, and remain, indeed, liminal (Kelly and McAdam, 2023). We conceptualise these different responses and legitimisation practices as *eclectic responses*. They are eclectic in the sense that they are neither rigid, nor linear, nor respond to one single logic. These eclectic responses to legitimacy building reflect the unique challenges of digital entrepreneurship. Intersecting and overlapping with offline institutional and social norms and expectations, the digital also enables multiple, adaptable actions, strategies and choices for legitimacy building that would be

unavailable to these women in conventional offline contexts, underscoring the complex overlap of contexts in which these women digital entrepreneurs operate in. It is an eclectic process of balancing paradoxical experiences and contradictory demands across overlapping socio-digital contexts (Crawford et al., 2024; McKelvey, 2004). Eclectic responses participate in legitimation work (Riandita et al., 2022), which responds to these paradoxical contextual logics and is necessary to ensure the development and sustainability of their digital business.

The facets of legitimation work

The legitimation work process is further illustrated by the combined symbolic and pragmatic actions of women digital entrepreneurs at the micro level of the agent, contextualised into broader structures. Women digital entrepreneurs pick, choose, and combine various legitimation activities in response to contextual demands. These deliberate actions have a symbolic value (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009a), as they are used purposefully. Thus, women digital entrepreneurs draw on responses and practices that blend symbolic actions with tangible interventions, creating a multi-faceted approach to professional credibility as a response to contextual constraints and tensions.

Extant studies on legitimacy building in the broader field of management studies emphasise the balancing act between conformity or resistance towards norms for social acceptance (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994; Bunduchi et al., 2023; Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002), and the construction of professional or entrepreneurial identity (Özbilgin and Woodward, 2004; Stead, 2017). This is notably discussed in micro-level studies about women entrepreneurs focusing on legitimacy building efforts (Navis and Glynn, 2011; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2021). Such processes of *legitimation work* are agentic as they depend on the actions of women entrepreneurs. Yet, these actions are contextualised, notably in prevailing gendered norms (Al-Dajani et al., 2021; Imiren et al., 2024; Swail and Marlow, 2018). As such, we argue that eclectic legitimation work occurs at the interplay of internal and external components and their boundary conditions.

Legitimation work (Riandita et al., 2022; Rueede and Kreutzer, 2015) is indeed multi-dimensional, as it considers that such processes simultaneously occur at the micro of the entrepreneur and at the macro, contextual level of social structures (Bitektine and Haack, 2015; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021). Therefore, across the three legitimation practices highlighted in Figure 4, legitimation work emerges as a nuanced and eclectic set of responses to contextual constraints wherein women digital entrepreneurs both embrace and challenge prevailing boundaries. For example, by adopting symbolic markers of professionalisation in spaces assumed to be informal and less demanding of credentials or physical markers of legitimacy, the entrepreneurs simultaneously conform to societal expectations and disrupt conventional wisdom about legitimacy in digital entrepreneurship. Such responses further highlight how creating boundaries becomes a symbolic resource (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009a) allowing women digital entrepreneurs to build legitimacy. Thus, boundary legitimation work results from the segregation strategy as both tangible (such as using professional invoicing or adopting formal business practices) and symbolic (such as curating their professional image on digital platforms) whilst other forms such as registering the business could be simultaneously symbolic and tangible. Moreover, the tension of co-existence between different normative expectations and the external and internal legitimation work processes highlights that women digital entrepreneurs are both innovative and conforming. The internal and external legitimation work become mechanisms for constructing credibility in a context conventionally viewed as lacking formal and well-developed frameworks. This stresses the central premise of paradox and tension thinking (Smith et al., 2017), emphasising two independent oppositions, that can co-exist whilst they are both valid at the same time ('both/and') and further reveal the boundary legitimation work, that keeps personal and business boundaries separate. Women digital entrepreneurs face the

challenge of maintaining professional credibility whilst working from home, where personal and business roles naturally overlap and boundaries become blurred; however, stakeholders expect to see evidence of separation between the entrepreneur's business and social role. This creates a tension: women digital entrepreneurs must navigate being able to blur boundaries by working from home to leverage the informality of the digital context whilst concurrently establishing boundaries to separate their personal and business roles to be considered 'professional'. Segregating entails boundary legitimization work in which the entrepreneurs restructure their presence across multiple spheres in the overlapping digital and social contexts to create boundaries where personal and business roles (and conflicting normative expectations) may be blurred. Such boundaries are made even more important due to the internal emotional toll it takes on these women. While experiences about cultural expectations to be meek and gentle may seem, at first glance, disconnected from the digital, we argue that such experience is intertwined with the digital context.

These are not just generic practices or responses, but deliberate legitimization work. Based on the findings, for example, invoicing is not just about operational functions of business, but signals professionalism in the absence of face-to-face interactions. Legitimation work and its tangible and symbolic responses is a form of gendered response to societal expectations which poses legitimacy building challenges. Furthermore, the tension between the perceived neutral and context-free nature of digital context and the societal expectations of formal markers of legitimacy building are not resolved by the responses of these women digital entrepreneurs. Instead, the choice to present formal markers of legitimacy and simultaneously blur boundaries by working from home reflects Smith and Lewis's (2011) argument that paradoxical tensions are not complexities to be resolved through binary choices.

External legitimization work further highlights the paradox of digital entrepreneurship for women. As presented above, whilst the overlapping socio-digital contexts enable lower barriers to entry into business, socio-cultural gendered norms still apply to women digital entrepreneurs (Martinez Dy et al., 2017; McAdam et al., 2019). For example, the careful curation of their digital presence to seek exposure underscores deliberate signalling and exposure in digital spaces where women entrepreneurs actively shape and control the professional presentation of themselves and their businesses. Thus, women digital entrepreneurs manage their digital footprint (Imiren et al., 2024) to build legitimacy through the careful presentation of selected digital artefacts and controlled information sharing. This external legitimization involves a form of compliance with societal norms and regulatory systems, for example through formalisation responses aiming at elevating the digital ventures of these entrepreneurs in their social context, attracting prestige, recognition and alignment with societal expectations of what 'proper' businesses are (Suchman, 1995: 574). Using professionalisation responses to signal compliance and credibility, women digital entrepreneurs display the 'taken for granted' attributes of their enterprise and can establish themselves as credible entrepreneurs. They build legitimacy by creating credentialed systems within spaces presumed as credential-free (Bogusz et al., 2019). By managing these tensions, women digital entrepreneurs simultaneously leverage the meritocratic narrative often associated with digital entrepreneurship, and the informality and flexibility afforded by digital contexts whilst establishing formal external legitimacy markers.

Internal legitimization work relates to the agentic responses these entrepreneurs adopt in a blend of symbolic and tangible actions within overlapping contexts. This occurs as a dynamic negotiation of the multiple tensions between contextual expectations and the promised flexibility of digital entrepreneurship. Women digital entrepreneurs adopt professionalisation of internal processes including introducing structure and procedures, competition participation, creation of context-appropriate business descriptions and online entrepreneur profile, implementing professional tracking systems and digital domains, establishing mentorship relationships and board committees.

These facets demonstrate the eclectic nature of their responses as part of the legitimization work process. While the eclectic responses do not resolve the tensions, together they show what we theorise as *eclectic legitimization work*. Eclectic legitimization work is evidenced in the symbolic and pragmatic actions of women digital entrepreneurs at the micro level as they pick, choose and combine various legitimization activities in response to contextual demands at the macro level.

Eclectic legitimization work for women digital entrepreneurs

We observe a nuanced approach to legitimization work, which account for multiple dimensions, co-existing paradoxical constraints, and tensions across overlapping contexts and a set of eclectic responses. Following the idea that these responses are non-linear and multi-faceted, we propose *eclectic legitimization work* to define the process of legitimacy building for women digital entrepreneurs. We highlight how this type of eclectic legitimization work embodies the offline/online paradoxical conditions and a set of tensions which women digital entrepreneurs must navigate. These conflicting challenges cannot be resolved through binary choices but are instead navigated through overlapping eclectic sets of responses with and within the digital and non-digital spaces (Kelly and McAdam, 2023). Whilst legitimization work is often a hybrid process between different logics and tensions (Riandita et al., 2022), the proposed eclectic legitimization work account for the non-linear nature of the process, and the overlapping ‘both/and’ responses to these tensions (Smith et al., 2017). This eclectic legitimization work process is further illustrated in the combined symbolic and pragmatic actions of women digital entrepreneurs at the interplay between entrepreneurial agency situation in overlapping contexts. Responses to different overlapping paradoxes and tensions exemplify how legitimization work is eclectic. It stems from the intertwined digital and socio-institutional context and their conflicting gendered normative expectations on women digital entrepreneurs. This further highlights how legitimization work underscores non-linear, and eclectic views of women digital entrepreneurs as agents operating within paradoxical socio-cultural conditions and overlapping tensions. Such eclectic responses to tensions (Riandita et al., 2022) and the on/offline overlap of contexts illuminate legitimization work as the navigation of paradoxical conditions.

Is this situation new, or has digital technology provided a new set of contextual complexities to women entrepreneurs? We accord with studies such as Martinez Dy et al. (2017) that the digital context reproduces and accentuates gendered unequal access to markets and resources. Yet, we argue that the digital context provides a set of paradoxical constraints and tensions, which women digital entrepreneurs need to navigate (Duffy and Hund, 2019; Heizmann and Liu, 2022; McAdam et al., 2020), comply with and/or challenge. Accordingly, digital entrepreneurship entails new eclectic responses at internal, boundary and external facets, that occur at the intersection of overlapping contexts and experiences.

Conclusion

This article presents how women digital entrepreneurs in Nigeria navigate overlapping contextual constraints and tensions, and reveals how, through a set of responses, they engage in eclectic legitimization work. The article therefore makes two important contributions to existing literature on women digital entrepreneurship. First, we provide a nuanced understanding of women digital entrepreneurship. By contextualising women digital entrepreneurship in overlapping gendered social, institutional, and digital contexts, the article contributes to current discussions on the persistence of gendered constraints and expectations within the digital (Martinez Dy et al., 2017; McAdam et al., 2020). Further, we conceptualise the situation of women digital entrepreneurs in Nigeria as paradoxical. Indeed, conflicting tensions and constraints affect women digital


entrepreneurs. They adopt eclectic responses to these contradicting contextual constraints and tensions in the offline/online contexts. Using paradox theory (Smith and Lewis, 2011), we posit that women digital entrepreneurs constantly face affordances and disaffordances of the digital space. This allows the article to contribute to a reframing of cyberfeminist debates (Kelly and McAdam, 2023; Wiig et al., 2024) by recognising and theorising together narratives of digital constraints whilst recognising agency and opportunities for responses.

Second, our theoretical contributions respond to calls to address less-explored dimensions of the role of new digital technologies and of the digital context on women entrepreneurship (McAdam et al., 2020; Nambisan, 2017). Following prior research (Imiren et al., 2024; Swail and Marlow, 2018), and based on our findings from our research on women digital entrepreneurs in Nigeria, we consider legitimacy building as a crucial element and resource in the establishment and sustainability of their businesses. Our study reveals the *eclectic legitimation work* that women digital entrepreneurs complete as part of multi-faceted processes that include various contextualised legitimation practices, that is, professionalisation, regularisation and symbolisation. Such novel theorisation of eclectic legitimation work in the context of the digital advances understanding of gendered approaches to digital entrepreneurship, which we see as a phenomenon articulating contexts and agency. Women digital entrepreneurs operate in overlapping contexts that bring paradoxical constraints and tensions, to which they respond with a set of eclectic practices. Empirically, we show that the context of Nigeria brings societal constraints (e.g. on the role of women as mothers and/or wives; and on informality), to which women digital entrepreneurs respond. Yet, none of these tensions and constraints is fully resolved.

The study has practical implications. To address challenges of women digital entrepreneurs requires a contextual approach. Given Nigeria's evolving digital context (Zottel et al., 2023), current policies such as the National Digital Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Startup Policy (NDISEP) should consider developing support systems that enhance enablers of multiple legitimation practices for women digital entrepreneurs operating in its emerging digital sectors. Building legitimacy as entrepreneurs, even in the digital, we argue, requires time, energy, as well as other resources in order to operate from a physical office, where other work arrangements, like working from home, would be unsuitable. Women digital entrepreneurs deploy more effort and resources into symbolic actions just to be seen as credible and legitimate. The under-illuminated aspect of women digital entrepreneurship, which emerges in our study highlights the importance of understanding multiple roles as part of the experience of women entrepreneurs. These multiple socially-embedded and expected roles intersect with the entrepreneurial process, and further constrain development and growth of digital entrepreneurship by women entrepreneurs. This realisation and institutional complexity, particularly salient for contexts characterised by underdeveloped support frameworks, merits further investigation in different regional contexts. Still, future research could strengthen the evidence base on the additional costs of gendered legitimacy work on women digital entrepreneurs, further exploring how it brings further challenges for women and theorising other strategies women digital entrepreneurs employ to navigate or overcome gendered barriers in diverse contexts (i.e. in different geographies). Future research needs to look in depth at evidence regarding ways in which multiple roles required of women digital entrepreneurs can inhibit their growth and development potential and what could be done in order to foster entrepreneurial outcomes.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. Global South refers to emerging and developing economies in non-Western contexts (UNCTAD, 2018). These countries are characterised by less developed support frameworks (Best et al., 2024) and institutional complexities (Imiren et al., 2024).

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