

ARE WOMEN-LED MICRO, SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES (WMSMEs) IN SRI LANKA USING SOCIAL MEDIA AS THEIR TRANSFORMATIVE DIGITAL TOOL? CASE STUDY INSIGHTS FROM SRI LANKA

Dr. (Ms.) Dilogini Sangarathas

Senior Lecturer
Department of Marketing
University of Jaffna

Abstract

This study explores the use of social media tools by Sri Lankan women-led micro, small, and medium enterprises (WMSMEs) as empowering digital technologies for entrepreneurship transformation. Following a qualitative case study approach, the study draws on in-depth, semi-structured, prolonged interviews with ten Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs representing different industries, supported by thematic analysis. Results show that social media enables such entrepreneurs to overcome geographical and socio-cultural borders, expand markets, and engage with consumers via visual storytelling and niche messaging. Entrepreneurs strategically mix and match platforms using Instagram and YouTube for brand building, Facebook for promotion, and WhatsApp for personalized communications while increasingly relying on analytics in guiding content and marketing decisions. Despite challenges such as low digital literacy, poor connectivity, and gendered social constraints, the women entrepreneurs exhibited resilience and adaptability in navigating the digital space. Despite the growing focus on digital tools, little is known about how women entrepreneurs strategically use social media for transformative business outcomes in developing contexts. This study engages with theories of digital entrepreneurship and gendered innovation to reveal how WMSMEs use social media for market expansion, customer engagement, and cultural storytelling. The findings highlight the need for targeted digital literacy programs to bridge infrastructure and socio-cultural gaps. This research contributes to the academic discourse by signifying WMSMEs' analytically driven, multi-platform strategies, and provides actionable insights for inclusive digitalization for policymakers.

Keywords: Digital entrepreneurship, Integrated platform use, Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), Social media marketing, Visual storytelling, Women entrepreneurs

Introduction

While Sri Lankan WMSMEs (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp) are increasingly using social media, their use is yet to be understood as a transformative tool defined in terms of revenue growth, operational efficiency, and long-term sustainability. Previous studies, often focused on scale or urbanity (e.g. Jayarathne et al. (2023)), have ignored rural entrepreneurship and gender-based barriers. This study addresses this gap through a case study of 10 WMSMEs, framed by empowerment theory and contextualized in the socio-economic landscape of Sri Lanka, where MSMEs contribute half of GDP but face digital divides.

Past studies and outlines show that social media opens up markets, deepens customer engagement and enables women to overcome socio-cultural barriers, particularly in rural areas. However, the extent to which social media is driving structural change such as improved business processes, financial growth and sustainability in the long run is yet to be explored (De Silva & Hansson, 2024). Furthermore, past studies indicate a mixed situation wherein success stories are accompanied by significant issues in the shape of digital literacy deficiencies, limited access to reliable internet and cultural impediments to women's overall digital activity (Acilar & Sæbø, 2023). Thus, a qualitative study is necessary for understanding how, why and to what extent social media use adds to concrete digital transformation among WMSMEs in Sri Lanka's diverse socio-economic as well as geographic environments. This research gap leaves the door open for deep, qualitative insights grounded in live-case studies that capture the rich realities of women entrepreneurs navigating the digital economy.

Contextual Background

In the developing and dynamic economic context of Sri Lanka, MSMEs are the backbone of national development (Niroshini Rathnasinghe, 2024). With over 80% of the total enterprises and contributing up to 52% of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the nation, MSMEs play a vital role in employment generation, income spread and regional growth. In this field, WMSMEs are emerging as drivers of economic and social transformation (Nuzla Rizkiya, 2024). Women entrepreneurs are establishing businesses in a variety of sectors such as agriculture, food processing, handicrafts, textiles and beauty services often reflecting their cultural heritage, innovation and resilience. Despite their growing importance, WMSMEs continue to face several structural and socio-cultural challenges. Restricted access to finance, restricted mobility, lack of access to formal business training and entrenched gender norms are all potent growth inhibitors for WMSMEs, especially those located in rural or underserved areas (Liyanagamage et al., 2024).

It is here that information and communication technology (ICT) and, more broadly, social media has been a game-changer for WMSMEs in Sri Lanka. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp provide low-cost digital mediums for women entrepreneurs to promote products, build customer relationships and expand the market. Social media has democratized

marketing and exposure, allowing even small businesses to compete in large, highly competitive markets (Chakraborty & Biswal, 2023). For the majority of WMSMEs, social media is not only a marketing tool but also a gateway to digital empowerment acting as a means to bypass traditional limitations such as geographical distance and infrastructural paucity (Jayarathne et al., 2023). As such, social media is not viewed only as a communication tool but as a strategic facilitator of business innovation, financial independence and sustainable development. This study explores critically the ways in which Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs use social media and whether it effectively functions as a transformative digital tool in their entrepreneurial lives.

Research Gap

In fact, the literature presents valuable evidence regarding the way digital technologies, especially social media is applied by women entrepreneurs, particularly across emerging markets (Lavilles et al., 2023; Paoloni et al., 2019). Recent studies provide significant evidence that social media has the potential to increase market coverage, provide easy customer interactions, and attract visibility for female entrepreneurs within male-dominated or resource-constrained environments (Fatima & Ali, 2023; Kuran & Khabbaz, 2025). However, there is a wide knowledge gap regarding whether or not such digital tools are being used as strategic instruments of deep, sustainable digital transformation particularly in the case of Sri Lankan WMSMEs. How much social media can increase business processes, economic sustainability, and structural innovation remains to be determined. Besides, problems like uneven digital literacy, poor infrastructure, and very entrenched socio-cultural norms continue to affect women entrepreneurs' digital activity in one way or another. For this, further qualitative studies are needed to explore how, why, and to what degree social media impacts profound business change among WMSMEs in Sri Lanka. Such a study would provide nuanced, contextualized findings beyond superficial adoption and provide a better sense of the role social media plays in their entrepreneurship.

This study explores the main research question: *How are WMSMEs in Sri Lanka using social media as a transformative digital tool for entrepreneurial development and growth?* Drawing on case study evidence, the study explores how these entrepreneurs use social media platforms to access larger markets, engage with customers, and express cultural identity with limited resources. It looks at how they use visual storytelling, conduct personalized communication, integrate multiple platforms, and respond to social media metrics to inform business decisions. The study also aims to reveal challenges they face digital, infrastructural, and socio-cultural barriers, for instance and how they navigate these in their respective environments. The ultimate goal is to expose how social media supports the development, existence, and transformation of WMSMEs in Sri Lanka, imparting knowledge of women's digital entrepreneurship in an emerging economy.

Literature Review

The enabling function of social media in promoting WMSMEs has been the focus of increasing research attention in emerging economies (Kuran & Khabbaz, 2025). Genç & Öksüz (2015) provide valuable information on shifting digital strategies among women-owned microenterprises, highlighting social media platforms like Instagram as central forces behind marketing and customer communication. Their research emphasizes social media's cost-effectiveness and widespread outreach opportunity, but also suggests problems such as content replication and targeting problems, emphasizing strategic insight that comes with effectively using digital platforms. Ukpere et al. (2014) broaden the context to an international level and refer to the global trend of increased social media adoption by women entrepreneurs. They point to the pivotal role of online platforms to expand business exposure and supplement entrepreneurial activity in both formal and informal economies. The study underscores the revolutionary potential of social media in enabling women to transition from job seekers to job creators through expanded exposure and networking.

Genç & Öksüz (2015) highlight the cost-effectiveness of Instagram's marketing, although their urban-centric model ignores rural constraints. Similarly, Ukpere et al. (2014) emphasize the universal reach of social media but fail to address cross-cutting barriers (e.g., gender norms, literacy). This review synthesizes how WMSMEs navigate these gaps, asking: How do sociocultural norms mediate social media use? and what strategies enable transformative use?

In North Africa and the Middle East, Chaker & Zouaoui (2023) analyze social media's empowering effects on women entrepreneurs in Tunisia. Based on qualitative research, their study highlights social media sites as key business development facilitators, supporting marketing strategies, customer relationships, and professional networks. The study injects valuable insights into how technology tools transcend the limitations of conventional businesses, motivating entrepreneurial processes for women in technology-rich but poorly researched environments.

Francesca et al. (2017) elaborate further on the conversation by venturing into how women entrepreneurship is interconnected with social media in several different global environments. Their exhaustive overview points toward an intense focus on emerging economies, emphasizing how social media could be used to deconstruct traditional business boundaries with responsive marketing and networking opportunities. However, they bring up an important research lag in understanding complicated effects within industrialized economies and requesting further studies of these interactions.

At the local level, initiatives like the Women Empowerment and Digital Inclusion (WEDI) initiative in Sri Lanka are good examples of joint initiatives that aim to use digital technologies for economic empowerment. Sarvodaya Fusion leads the project, which emphasizes the integration of digital literacy, entrepreneurship development, and online marketplaces to empower women entrepreneurs across industries. The fact that the project was successful in creating Sri Lanka's first

women entrepreneurs' online platform shows how digital solutions can bring inclusive economic growth and business capability (Sarvodaya Fusion, 2023).

Building on these pillars, De Silva & Hansson (2024) conducted a mixed-methods study to investigate the effects of social media on business performance and women's empowerment among Sri Lankan entrepreneurs. The findings of the research reveal social media's role in attitude change, knowledge sharing, and networking crucial for business success. The study highlights the strategic application of social media to overcome digital literacy barriers and optimize entrepreneurial results in Sri Lanka's evolving economic environment.

Despite these contributions, existing literature focuses on individual industries or domestic projects, such as beauty salons (De Silva & Henrik Hansson, 2022), without examining broader conceptualizations of digital transformation challenges and possibilities across various WMSME sectors in Sri Lanka. Existing research strives to fill this gap by examining how WMSMEs strategically employ social media as a digital transformative platform, withstanding digital literacy, market saturation, and audience engagement issues. By exploring these dynamics, the research seeks to provide in-depth studies of the combined impact of social media on Sri Lankan women-owned businesses and, in doing so, contribute to scholarly understanding as well as practical application for digital entrepreneurship.

Methodology

Case Study Design

This multi-case study examines 10 WMSMEs from urban and rural divisions (e.g. Colombo vs. Mullaitivu), which were selected through purposive sampling to capture different industries and levels of digital literacy. Although small, the sample is consistent with qualitative norms (Braun & Clarke, 2021), prioritizing depth. Interviews (45–80 minutes) were transcribed and analyzed thematically, with an audit trail of coding notes and reflection notes to enhance reliability. Limitations include the lack of triangulation with a one-way site analysis for future research. Case study investigations are particularly pertinent to explore deep and complicated questions in real situations so that ample comprehension regarding peoples' behavior and actions may be acquired (Mtisi, 2022; Robert K. Yin, 2014; Yin et al., 2014). This case study design makes it possible to research the ways in which social media influences women entrepreneurs' business practices in subtle terms.

Case Selection and Recruitment

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select ten WMSMEs across different industries, including handicrafts, fashion accessories, food and beverage services, beauty and personal care, bridal and gift services, food wholesale, wellness and yoga studios, and women's retail fashion. Participants were chosen based on their active use of at least one social media platform (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, or WhatsApp) for business purposes. This approach ensures the inclusion of rich information cases that can provide meaningful information

regarding the research question (Suri, 2011). Recruitment was facilitated through women's business networks, internet business communities, and word of mouth, which aligns with methods proposed to reach specific groups in qualitative research (see Table 1) (Noy, 2008).

Table 1: Details of women entrepreneur respondents

Respondent Code	Industry Sector	Product/Service Description	District	Interview Duration
R1	Handicrafts / Creative Industry	Palmyra-based handicrafts	Kilinochchi	45 Minutes
R2	Fashion Accessories	Terracotta jewelry	Mullaitivu	70 Minutes
R3	Food & Beverage / Café Services	Specialty coffee, desserts	Jaffna	75 Minutes
R4	Beauty, Cosmetics, Personal Care	Beauty treatments, bridal makeup	Jaffna	60 Minutes
R5	Handicrafts & Gifts	Personalized crafts, gift items with cultural themes	Matara	50 Minutes
R6	Bridal & Beauty Services	Bridal saree design, makeup, and jewelry consultation	Kandy	65 Minutes
R7	Beauty Services	Bridal makeup, beauty services	Colombo	60 Minutes
R8	Food Wholesaler	Mixture items (food products and blends)	Jaffna	78 Minutes
R9	Wellness / Yoga Studio	Yoga classes and wellness programs	Jaffna	55 Minutes
R10	Women's Clothing / Retail Fashion	Trendy women's apparel and accessories	Jaffna	63 Minutes

Data Collection

Primary data were collected in the form of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, a technique effective in recovering detailed information about participants' experiences and opinions (Prior, 2018). Interviews were face-to-face, by telephone, or via digital platforms, depending on the accessibility and preferences of the participants. All interviews lasted 45 to 80 minutes and were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. An interview guide was prepared to explore themes by the researcher (see Table 2).

Table 2: Interview guide: semi-structured interview questions

1	How has social media helped you find new customers?
2	Are you getting more orders from outside your area since using social media?
3	What kind of photos or videos do you usually post about your products?
4	Do you share stories or behind-the-scenes content on your social media pages?
5	How do you usually communicate with your customers?
6	Do you use WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, or other apps to talk to customers directly?
7	What social media platforms do you use for your business?
8	Can you explain how you use different platforms for different purposes (like posting, advertising, chatting)?
9	Do you check likes, comments, or other statistics on your posts?
10	Have you changed the way you post because of what you saw in social media insights or feedback?
11	What difficulties have you faced in using social media for your business?
12	How did you learn to use social media and overcome any problems or criticism from others?

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, an established technique for the identification, analysis, and reporting of qualitative data patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Analysis was carried out using a six-stage process: familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report (see Table 3). Inductive coding strategy was used to gain a comprehensive picture of how social media is a transformation tool for WMSMEs (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The utilization of NVivo software facilitated the smooth handling and analysis of data to enhance the quality and transparency of the research process (Brandão, 2015).

Table 3: Coding chart for thematic analysis of WMSMEs' social media use

Open coding	Axial coding	Final coding / Coded themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-cost advertising • No budget ads • Facebook boosting • Attract customers • Local to global reach • Visibility boost • Attract foreign customers • Geographical barriers • Instagram storytelling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost-effective marketing • Market reach and visibility • Storytelling and cultural identity • Visual marketing • Direct and personal communication • Customer loyalty and engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market penetration via social media • Visual narrative and cultural storytelling • Customer relationship via messaging • Integrated social media use • Analytics-enabled learning • Challenges and coping

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural narrative • Behind-the-scenes content • Product aesthetics • YouTube demo • Instagram visuals • Demonstration videos • Cultural representation • Storytelling • WhatsApp feedback • Custom order chat • Instant feedback • Order confirmations • Customer trust • Personalized replies • Relationship-building • Repeat orders • Cross-channel content • Instagram for photos • Facebook for ads • WhatsApp for closing • Holistic branding • Platform purpose • Brand consistency • Engagement • Personalized service • Engagement insights • Analytics-based content • Likes, shares, comments • Hashtag reach • Peak hours • Audience growth • Data-driven content • Low tech knowledge • Connectivity issue • Lack of skills • Poor internet access • Social stigma • Not taken seriously • Traditional gender roles • Digital empowerment • Showcase my work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-platform strategy • Strategic understanding • Data-informed decision making • Hashtag and timing strategies • Digital literacy and connectivity • Gender norms and social constraints 	
--	--	--

Validity and Credibility

In order to validate the dependability of findings, various strategies were employed. Member checking was employed by showing interview transcripts and preliminary findings to participants to validate the accuracy of interpretation, enhancing credibility (Morse, 2015). Academic peer debriefing sessions allowed for positive criticism on the coding process and thematic development, supporting confirmability (Shenton, 2004). An audit trail of choices throughout the research process was maintained in order to contribute dependability and transferability (Nowell et al., 2017).

Findings and Discussion

Findings from the interviews highlight the role that social media has played in reshaping the business growth of Sri Lankan WMSMEs. From their responses, participants indicated that social media platforms have helped them gain an expanded market, broaden the exposure of products, and gain more intimate customer interactions with personalized messages and stories. The strategic use of multiple platforms and the growing reliance on analytics demonstrate a movement towards advanced, digital business practices. Despite facing setbacks in the guise of digital literacy deficiencies and connectivity issues, entrepreneurs confirmed a high level of resilience, using them as learning and development opportunities. These revelations form the basis of the key themes presented below.

Theme 1: Market penetration via social media

Arguably the most striking of the interview findings is that social media have been at the center of the geographic reach of WMSMEs. Entrepreneurs who previously relied on traditional, place-based methods of acquiring customers word-of-mouth, community networks, and local markets are now activating customers far beyond their immediate geographic area. For example, R1, a Palmyra-based handicraft seller from Kilinochchi, shared:

“At first, I was relying just on word of mouth and the community marketplace that was here. But ever since I’ve had my Facebook page, I’m getting orders from Colombo and even some overseas. It’s like having a window to the rest of the world where they appreciate our traditional effort. I never imagined my little effort could reach so many.”

This is the way that social media has dissipated the obstacles which in the past constrained district and rural-based businesses to neighborhood markets. Not only does it raise awareness but also gets culture and handmade items to customers who would otherwise never have heard about them.

Likewise, R2, a fashion designer of terracotta accessories based in Mullaitivu, experienced a surge of buyer interest from districts after promoting her items on Instagram:

“I initially had only customers from nearby towns who knew me. Once I posted my terracotta jewelry designs on Instagram, I got orders from other districts too.”

Even a client from India shared my page, and I gained more followers. Social media has opened my business to geographical limits I could not cross before.”

These results confirm that social media is an affordable avenue of outreach and growth, especially for women who are restricted in mobility or possess lower mobility to participate in physical trade networks. Social media sites like Facebook and Instagram are not just vehicles of promotion, but digital marketplaces that equalize opportunities for access to wider consumer markets where small-scale women entrepreneurs can trade in broader markets with minimal costs.

The women entrepreneurs surveyed employed social media to access remote markets outside of their immediate environs, demonstrating how computer technology creates new business opportunities. This is supported by Genç & Öksüz’s (2015) conclusions that social platforms such as Instagram enable women’s microenterprises to access a greater number of customers at little cost. Equally, Ukpere et al. (2014) point out that social media facilitates women to make the transition from job seekers to entrepreneurs by scaling up. These Sri Lankan WMSMEs make sure social media wipes away earlier market challenges despite limited resources.

Theme 2: Visual narrative and cultural storytelling

Another significant finding to emerge from the interviews is the use of visual narrative and cultural storytelling to increase the attractiveness of a product and gain emotional relationships with consumers. Female entrepreneurs are not just showcasing their finished products through social media but are specifically creating a visual narrative that reveals the processes, traditions, and personal stories behind their work. This form of content resonates with people strongly and assists in developing a unique brand identity founded on heritage and authenticity. R8, who runs a traditional sweets store in Jaffna, explained how she utilizes video content to give viewers a look inside her kitchen and her heritage:

“My customers love when I share behind-the-scenes footage of how I create our traditional treats. I show them the ingredients, the blending process, and even little stories about learning how to make them when I was a child. It’s not just selling the product it’s sharing the sensation and the culture behind it. That’s what keeps them attached.”

This aspect draws attention to the way behind-the-scenes details and storytelling make the business more human, more relatable, and more emotionally attached. This allows customers to glimpse a little bit of cultural life and heritage on social media, creating customer attachment as well as brand authenticity.

In the same way, R1, collaborating with Palmyra crafts, said:

“Throughout my page, I don’t just reveal the final product, but the way it was created as well starting from how the Palmyra leaves are chosen up to the weaving process. I also describe how my village women taught me this art form. Everybody keeps saying that they enjoy reading about the stories and that it helps them understand and appreciate the product even better since they’re aware of the tradition and the love.”

Her approach embodies the manner in which the use of visual media paired with intergenerational stories gives the product more depth and cultural value. By doing so, these entrepreneurs are not just selling their products but also preserving and respecting indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, thereby turning their social media sites into sites of cultural production. This finding underscores the fact that on the cyberspace, particularly for women-owned small enterprises, authentic visual and narrative content is a compelling marketing vehicle. Not only will it get your attention but will also create valuable connection with customers who seek beyond merchandise they seek stories, emotion, and feeling of belongingness.

Participants concentrated on storytelling and visual content like unveiling products' creation or personal recollections to emotionally engage with customers. This supports Chaker & Zouaoui (2023), who confirmed that storytelling on social media helps women entrepreneurs in emerging economies build closer relationships with their audience. It also supports (De Silva & Hansson, 2024) contention that emotional and cultural content helps to increase customer engagement and branding.

Theme 3: Customer relationship via messaging

One of the most important insights that can be drawn from women entrepreneurs' stories is the facilitation role that messaging channels, particularly WhatsApp, play in building customer relationships. Rather than being mere transactional tools, the channels are now being used to develop personalized, ongoing interactions that help build customer loyalty and trust. For WMSMEs, especially those selling customized or handmade products, direct messaging facilitates more personalized and interactive customer communication with customers. For instance, R5, owner of a gift and craft store, described how WhatsApp had evolved into a platform for not only taking orders but also community-style interaction:

“WhatsApp has become something beyond an order tool. Some customers send selfies of themselves wearing the things they bought and give feedback. They ask for new stock and even give tips. I respond personally, and it makes them feel part of something. It builds trust, and many of them keep coming back and even refer me to their friends.”

This illustrates the manner in which interactive and emotive conversations via messaging platforms fuel the consumer experience, turning customers into repeat business and even brand advocates. The sense of belonging to a small business community becomes a potent instrument in retaining customers.

Also, R2 described how she had tried using WhatsApp as a means of personalization and customer dialogue:

“Several of my customers prefer it when they can speak with me directly on WhatsApp instead of leaving a comment on an open post. They ask for customizations, inquire about the prices, and even talk about their events where they will be using my Terracotta jewelry items. It becomes a real relationship, not a transaction. It is this personal touch that helps me build a loyal clientele.”

This perspective highlights how WhatsApp's casual and private environment gives customers liberty to express freely their needs and to be appreciated and heard. This also equips the entrepreneur to provide an improved personalized and emotional service that is most valued in markets such as fashion, crafts, and personal care where trust and belonging directly influence the purchase decisions.

Overall, this finding underscores that in digitally enabled microenterprises, one-to-one messaging systems are essential not only for selling, but also for building relationships, collecting feedback, and customer closeness, and give women entrepreneurs an edge in an oversaturated cyber market. The use of WhatsApp as a channel to connect at a personal level with clients reflects how female business owners establish trust relationships. This is supported by De Silva & Hansson's (2024) work that one-on-one communication on digital media helps create loyalty and repeat business. It also concurs with the global view of Ukpere et al. (2014) on how social media creates customers into stronger relationships and helps women grow their businesses more casually but effectively.

Theme 4: Integrated Social Media Use

Women entrepreneurs' responses indicate a synergistic and integrated application of different social media platforms to enhance business performance. Rather than relying on one basis, these entrepreneurs integrate the utilization of different platforms where each platform plays a particular role in the customer journey from discovery to purchase. R6, the owner of a bridal and beauty service business, described her structured way of using the platform:

"I use Instagram to post pictures and reels that are aesthetically pleasing, especially bridal looks, because it resonates with young women. Then I put up promotional posts and offers on Facebook, and then shut down sales and arrange delivery on WhatsApp. Each is utilized for something different, and I've learned how to blend them together so that I'm getting the most out of it. It's like running a showroom on the network."

This is a model of multi-platform engagement. Instagram serves as the visual inspiration space, Facebook as the promotional channel, and WhatsApp for direct, transactional communication. This platform segmentation is not only efficient but also customer-focused since it leverages the unique affordances of each platform to cater to audience taste and habits.

Similarly, R10, who runs a women's clothing retail business, outlined a similar pattern that achieves meticulous coordination between social sites:

"As a female businessperson, YouTube has provided a powerful space to share my business journey through storytelling, helping me truly connect with others while increasing my visibility and impact. Whenever I upload fresh clothing collections, I post elegant pictures on Instagram initially because pictures play an important role. Next, I display paid advertisements on Facebook to cover a larger number of people. Most orders get completed on WhatsApp, where the customers inquire about size availability or payment information. Handling all platforms simultaneously is now my everyday routine."

Her witness lends credence to the direction of functional specialization whereby YouTube is helping female entrepreneurs share their business journeys through storytelling, Instagram is utilized for aesthetic value and initial engagement, Facebook for broader audience reach through paid advertisement, and WhatsApp for customer support and sales conversion on a one-to-one basis. It is also noteworthy that utilization of these tools in operations indicates a greater degree of digital maturity among WMSMEs. Such a finding indicates how web-savvy entrepreneurs are not only embracing social media but also fitting its use according to the different stages of the customer funnel. By so doing, they map what would otherwise be siloed platforms onto an integrated digital ecosystem literally replicating the offline retail experience online.

This integrated utilization enhances customer experience, business efficiency, and scalability. The majority of WMSMEs employed Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp for business purposes promoting, engaging, and selling. This supports Genç & Öksüz's (2015) argument that women entrepreneurs need to be intentional about how they use different platforms. This study shows that even without formal training, women are learning to manage these tools and leverage them in an effort to create a full online business process.

Theme 5: Analytics-Enabled Learning

A standout finding among the interviews is the growing data-awareness and analytical thinking amongst women entrepreneurs when it comes to their social media usage. Whereas some began with a casual start to their digital presence, subsequently, they embraced integrated social media analytics to restrict their approach and enhance engagement. R4, who offers beauty treatments, illustrated how data informed her posting schedules:

“Previously I would post randomly. But then I noticed from the insights that my posts were getting more likes and shares in the night. Now I post between 7 to 8 pm, and I also see what type of posts pics or videos get more engagement. It’s like having a tool that tells me what my audience is seeking, and I use it to improve.”

This declaration marks a clear shift from intuitive posting of content to evidence-based scheduling of content. By monitoring audience engagement metrics such as likes and shares, R4 has adjusted her strategy tuning not only the timing of posts but also the nature of content. Her experience shows the power of social media analytics in converting guesswork into actionable data, even for one with minimal formal training.

Similarly, R3 recounted how her Facebook experimenting with analytics tools produced more thoughtful content decisions:

“I never thought I’d be using something like ‘analytics,’ but when I saw the page insights on Facebook, I was surprised to see which posts were doing well. I experimented with hashtags, and noticed some of them gained new followers. So now, before I post, I think about what time, what content, and what words I use. It’s all about what the data tells me.”

Her story illustrates how through a process of trial and error, amplified by analytics feedback, she could refine her messaging and targeting. This is adaptive learning in the making, in which even elementary metrics like the performance of hashtags and timing can add up to improved outreach and growth.

Collectively, these accounts show a new trend: WMSMEs are not only content creators but also analysts. With more engagement with platform functionalities, they are becoming more strategic in their online marketing efforts. These findings emphasize the importance of digital skills in facilitating transparency on platforms, allowing entrepreneurs to make better decisions in a more competitive digital economy. Some WMSMEs disclosed how they were trained to leverage platform data to improve content, timing, and posting. This supports studies by De Silva & Hansson (2024), citing that social media helps women entrepreneurs make better business decisions using data with less digital training. These Sri Lankan women prove that digital tools like analytics can support learning and strategy development if used responsibly.

Theme 6: Challenges and Coping

Although social media opens doors, the majority of women entrepreneurs have faced a number of challenges in their digital transformation experience from technological to socio-cultural resistance. Yet what is overwhelmingly evident in their descriptions is a story of resilience, learning, and empowerment by stages. R7 freely discusses her difficulties with technology and accessibility:

“Seriously, technology was a real challenge for me. I wasn’t brought up with smartphones. When I originally created my page, I had no idea how to post. My niece taught me how to get everything working. Even now, I am frustrated when the internet is slow. At times, I wait until midnight to post a video, but I keep at it because I realize this is the future.”

Her narrative suggests the digital intergenerational divide and the resilience that goes into bridging it. Even upon initial exposure to smartphones and social networking websites, R7 was determined to learn. Her experience reveals the necessity for cross-age bridges in support structures such as help offered by younger relatives and her determination to stay alive and connected to the digital economy.

R9 lights deeply ingrained gender norms discouraging women’s participation in the public sphere in the online space:

“There were people within my community and relatives who would taunt me when I first started appearing online. They’d say that women should not be wasting time on the internet or carrying out occupational in the open. But I never paid heed to them. I have learned slowly, and I am happy about where I have gone so far.”

This quote shows the intersectional limitations that women face not just technical, but cultural and ideological as well. R9’s motivation to be a good role model for her community is an example of how women business owners have a dual mandate: developing their businesses and dismantling gender-constraining roles.

Her incremental learning process is representative of the empowerment path that many digital entrepreneurs face for the first time in conservative settings.

All of these descriptions provide a vivid picture of adaptive coping measures whether it is asking for help, staying up all night to overcome connectivity issues, or defying male-controlled norms. They reveal how the digital shift in WMSMEs is not merely a matter of technology adoption but about navigating structural and cultural challenges with courage and creativity. Respondents discussed obstacles like digital inaptitude, low internet speed, and disapproval from family and society. This is similar to Chaker & Zouaoui (2023), who mentioned that digital illiteracy was among the main obstacles for women in emerging economies. Likewise, WEDI in Sri Lanka (Sarvodaya Fusion, 2023) emphasized training and support as central to helping women overcome the same. Despite difficulties, the women in this study were resilient, learning from others and adapting yet to digital platforms.

Contributions of the Study

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to knowledge on how social media can be leveraged as a platform for digital transformation for WMSMEs in Sri Lanka. Based on an exploration of social media's role in informing solutions for challenges like digital literacy, saturation of the market, and audience engagement, this study contributes to current digital entrepreneurship literature. It offers a contextual layer to previous work (e.g., De Silva & Hansson, 2024; Genç & Öksüz, 2015), which is primarily focused on standalone platforms or industries. The findings emphasize the strategic use of social media, integrating multiple platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp for optimizing customer relations and market outreach.

This study advances gender-based innovation theory by revealing how WMSMEs in Sri Lanka disrupt patriarchal norms through analytical strategies. In contrast to the Lebanon-focused work of Kuran & Khabbaz (2025), the findings highlight cultural resilience as a driver of digital transformation, urging scholars to reconsider models of empowerment in low-infrastructure contexts. This study's findings can be positioned as a complementary perspective to Kuran & Khabbaz (2025), by emphasizing how Sri Lankan WMSMEs navigate unique socio-cultural and infrastructural challenges. Their study focuses on the strategic use of social media marketing and AI in Lebanon, adding depth to this research by showing how women are creatively using social media for market access and customer engagement in resource-constrained environments. This comparison highlights context-specific digital strategies and enriches the broader discourse on women's digital entrepreneurship and empowerment.

Practical Implications

Practically, this research offers relevant information to entrepreneurs, policymakers, and support organizations. For entrepreneurs, the research shows the importance of integrating social media into business strategy to access additional markets, gain customer loyalty, and increase product promotion. The

use of social media analytics practically is a breakthrough, as it allows entrepreneurs to tailor their marketing to suit tastes of audiences and achieve maximum engagement.

For policy makers, the results highlight the importance of digital literacy initiatives and capacity development programs that enable women entrepreneurs to use digital tools optimally. Furthermore, institutions such as the WEDI initiative (Sarvodaya Fusion, 2023) can leverage these findings to develop more focused support programs, promoting inclusive economic growth and improving women's digital empowerment in Sri Lanka and comparable settings.

Conclusion

This study redefines the transformative application for WMSMEs, signifying how social media can foster market access, cultural preservation and resilience across digital divides. Key recommendations include gender-sensitive digital literacy programs for rural entrepreneurs, infrastructure investments to ensure internet access and policy frameworks that integrate social media into MSME support initiatives. Future research should explore the lasting effects and roles of men in enabling women's digital entrepreneurship. Through social media platforms, these entrepreneurs are expanding their space of market, enhancing customers' interaction, and keeping up with digital trends despite challenges like limited digital literacy and saturation in the market. The tactic use of social media allows these women business owners to engage in closer contact with customers, optimize advertising strategies through tracking, and achieve a more interactive digital presence. Lastly, this research highlights the central position occupied by social media in driving business growth and empowerment, envisioning further investment in online literacy and support infrastructure to harness the full potential of social media as a change agent for women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka.

References

1. Acilar, A., & Sæbø, Ø. (2023). Towards understanding the gender digital divide: a systematic literature review. *Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication*, 72(3), 233–249. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GKMC-09-2021-0147>
2. Brandão, C. (2015). Qualitative data analysis with Nvivo. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 12(4), 492–494. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2014.992750>
3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 21(1), 37–47. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12360>
4. Chaker, H., & Zouaoui, S. (2023). Meeting the Challenge of Entrepreneurship with Social Media: The Case of Tunisian Women Entrepreneurs. *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Emerging Economies*, 9(1), 33–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23939575221138439>

5. Chakraborty, U., & Biswal, S. K. (2023). Impact of social media participation on female entrepreneurs towards their digital entrepreneurship intention and psychological empowerment. *Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship*, 25(3), 374–392. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRME-03-2021-0028>
6. De Silva, T., & Hansson, H. (2024). The Impact of Social Media on Business Performance of Women Entrepreneurs and their Empowerment: A Mixed Methods Study in the Context of Sri Lanka. *Managing Global Transitions*, 22(2). <https://doi.org/10.26493/1854-6935.22.167-192>
7. De Silva, T., & Henrik Hansson. (2022). Social Media as a Digital Tool Changing the Game Plan of Women Entrepreneurs-Case on the usage of Facebook in the Beauty Salon Sector of Sri Lanka. *Proceedings of EdMedia + Innovate Learning*, 992–1000.
8. Fatima, N., & Ali, R. (2023). How businesswomen engage customers on social media? *Spanish Journal of Marketing - ESIC*, 27(2), 221–240. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SJME-09-2021-0172>
9. Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 80–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500107>
10. Francesca, M. C., Paola, D., & Paola, P. (2017). Women in business and social media: Implications for female entrepreneurship in emerging countries. *African Journal of Business Management*, 11(14), 316–326. <https://doi.org/10.5897/AJBM2017.8281>
11. Genç, M., & Öksüz, B. (2015). A Fact or an Illusion: Effective Social Media usage of Female Entrepreneurs. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 195, 293–300. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.06.345>
12. Jayarathne, M. H. M., Surangi, H. A. K. N. S., & Ranwala, R. (2023). The Road Ahead is Uphill: Female Entrepreneurs and Digitalization in Small and Medium Enterprise Sector in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Business and Technology*, 7(2), 16–32. <https://doi.org/10.4038/jbt.v7i2.97>
13. Kuran, O., & Khabbaz, L. (2025). Leveraging social media marketing and AI to enhance social performance in women-led microenterprises. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2025.2479860>
14. Lavilles, R., Tinam-Isan, M. A., & Sala, E. L. (2023). Social media as an enabler of women’s entrepreneurial empowerment during the pandemic. *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies*, 29(1), 136–153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2023.2186633>
15. Liyanagamage, N., Glavas, C., Schuster, L., & Kodagoda, T. (2024). “Surviving” and “thriving” during uncertainty: Uncovering the stories of women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka. *Journal of the International Council for Small Business*, 5(4), 402–411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26437015.2024.2390859>

16. Morse, J. M. (2015). Critical Analysis of Strategies for Determining Rigor in Qualitative Inquiry. *Qualitative Health Research*, 25(9), 1212–1222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315588501>
17. Mtisi, S. (2022). The Qualitative Case Study Research Strategy as Applied on a Rural Enterprise Development Doctoral Research Project. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221145849>
18. Niroshini Rathnasinghe. (2024). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) of Sri Lanka. Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. <https://www.freiheit.org/south-asia/small-and-medium-sized-enterprises-smes-sri-lanka>
19. Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic Analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 160940691773384. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
20. Noy, C. (2008). Sampling Knowledge: The Hermeneutics of Snowball Sampling in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11(4), 327–344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570701401305>
21. Nuzla Rizkiya. (2024). The role of SMEs in Sri Lanka – the economic backbone. *Daily Mirror*. https://www.dailymirror.lk/sme_connect/The-role-of-SMEs-in-Sri-Lanka-the-economic-backbone/546-290095?
22. Paoloni, P., Secundo, G., Ndou, V., & Modaffari, G. (2019). Women Entrepreneurship and Digital Technologies: Towards a Research Agenda (pp. 181–194). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00335-7_12
23. Prior, M. T. (2018). Interviews and Focus Groups. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Applied Linguistics Research Methodology* (pp. 225–248). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59900-1_11
24. Robert K. Yin. (2014). *Case study research: design and methods* (5th ed.). SAGE.
25. Sarvodaya Fusion. (2023). *Women Empowerment and Digital Inclusion (WEDI)*. <https://www.sarvodayafusion.org/women-empowerment-and-digital-inclusion>
26. Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>
27. Suri, H. (2011). Purposeful Sampling in Qualitative Research Synthesis. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 11(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ1102063>
28. Ukpere, C. L., Slabbert, A. D., & Ukpere, W. I. (2014). Rising Trend in Social Media Usage by Women Entrepreneurs across the Globe to Unlock Their Potentials for Business Success. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n10p551>
29. Yin, K., Wang, R., An, Q., Yao, L., & Liang, J. (2014). Using eco-efficiency as an indicator for sustainable urban development: A case study of Chinese provincial capital cities. *Ecological Indicators*, 36, 665–671. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolind.2013.09.003>