

Beyond the Screen: Unpacking the Challenges, Strategies, and Empowerment Pathways of Successful Women Digital Entrepreneurs

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ABSTRACT

Digital platforms have opened new pathways for women to build businesses on their own terms. Yet the everyday realities behind this promise remain underexplored, particularly outside Western contexts. This study examines how successful women digital entrepreneurs in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, experience and respond to the challenges of running a digitally based business, and how these responses translate into business empowerment. “Successful” here means women who had sustained a digitally based business for at least two years, shown demonstrable growth, achieved stable or growing income from that business, and attained recognised standing within their market. The study used a qualitative, case-study design grounded in an interpretivist perspective. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with four purposively sampled women digital entrepreneurs operating in the beauty, health and wellness, and fashion industries, and the data were analysed thematically. Findings show that participants faced four interrelated categories of challenges: technological challenges (digital skills gaps and platform adaptation), constraints on digital presence (a limited follower base and posting that was hard to keep consistent), pressure to balance work with home life (role conflict and time pressure), and market challenges (intense competition and fragile customer trust). To work through these obstacles, the women relied on four corresponding strategies: continuous learning, deliberate platform choices, how they handled customer relationships, and how they organised their time and competing roles. These strategies, in turn, produced three overlapping empowerment outcomes: economic empowerment through income stability and asset accumulation, time and role empowerment through greater command over competing responsibilities, and psychological and social empowerment through stronger confidence, professional identity, and networks. The study argues that business empowerment in digital entrepreneurship is best understood as a lived, cumulative process, not a fixed outcome of technology adoption. Implications for entrepreneurship support agencies, training providers, and policymakers seeking to design more context-sensitive interventions for women digital entrepreneurs are discussed.

Keywords: digital entrepreneurship, business empowerment, women digital entrepreneurs, work-life balance, qualitative case study, Malaysia

I. INTRODUCTION

The rules of who gets to start a business, and how, have shifted quietly but substantially in the digital era. A storefront once demanded capital, a physical location, and connections that were, historically, harder for women to secure. A smartphone and a social media account can now accomplish much of the same work. Digital entrepreneurship broadly refers to the pursuit of business opportunities that are created, shaped, and delivered through digital technologies such as social media, e-commerce marketplaces, cloud-based tools, and mobile platforms [17], [7]. For many women, what matters most about this shift is not convenience but access. It offers a route into economic activity that does not always demand the same formal capital, credentials, or physical mobility that conventional entrepreneurship has long required.

Malaysia offers a particularly relevant setting in which to examine this shift. Women make up close to half of

the Malaysian population and are central to the country's social and economic development. Their participation in entrepreneurship, and in digital entrepreneurship specifically, nonetheless continues to trail that of men [1]. Government initiatives under national development strategies have sought to widen participation among low-income households, with digital entrepreneurship positioned as one practical route toward that goal. Even so, the number of women digital entrepreneurs remains comparatively modest. Questions remain about what actually happens once a woman decides to build a business online, including what stands in her way, how she responds, and whether that response leaves her genuinely better off.

This is where the present study is positioned. Existing research on digital entrepreneurship has tended to concentrate on technology adoption and platform-performance outcomes. Comparatively little attention has been paid to how these experiences translate into empowerment for women specifically, and even less to non-Western, Southeast Asian contexts such as Malaysia [2], [14]. Business empowerment is defined here as the process through which individuals gain the resources, skills, and agency needed to start, sustain, and grow a business. This process, in turn, strengthens their autonomy in both business and personal life [32]. This study treats it not as a variable to be measured against a checklist but as an outcome that emerges from lived entrepreneurial experience.

Against this backdrop, the present study looks at business empowerment in digital entrepreneurship by drawing on what four successful women digital entrepreneurs in Kuala Lumpur, working across the beauty, health and wellness, and fashion sectors, had to say about their own experiences. Two questions guide this inquiry. First, what challenges do these women encounter in adopting and sustaining digital entrepreneurship? Second, what strategies do they use to work through these challenges and, in doing so, achieve business empowerment? In answering these questions, the study aims to contribute a grounded, Malaysian-context account of how digital entrepreneurship functions as a pathway to empowerment. It is, at heart, a story about women actively negotiating competing demands on their time, resources, and identities, rather than a story about technology alone.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Digital Entrepreneurship and Its Enabling Role for Women

Digital entrepreneurship is generally understood as entrepreneurial activity that is created, scaled, and sustained through digital technologies and infrastructures, rather than merely supported by them [17], [27]. Kollmann et al. [17] frame it as the fusion of digital technology and entrepreneurial activity, in which platforms, networks, and digital infrastructure enable the creation and growth of ventures. Steininger et al. [27] take this further. In their view, digital entrepreneurship is not simply an extension of conventional entrepreneurship. It represents a distinct paradigm shift in how opportunities are identified, evaluated, and exploited, owing to the convergence, programmability, and generativity that digital technologies uniquely offer.

For women specifically, this shift carries particular significance. Digital tools and e-commerce platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Shopee, and Lazada have lowered the practical barriers to starting a business. They reduce the need for a physical premise, large upfront capital, or extensive professional mobility [4]. Existing research suggests that digital entrepreneurship allows women to reconcile business ambitions with family responsibilities more readily than conventional business ownership, since work can often be conducted from home and on a flexible schedule [2]. In the Malaysian setting, several factors appear to shape whether these outcomes translate into stronger empowerment for women running digital ventures. How willing a woman is to try new digital tools, how confident she feels running an online business, how comfortable she is on social platforms, and how actively she engages her audience online all seem to play a part [1].

B. Challenges Confronting Women Digital Entrepreneurs

Despite this promise, the literature is consistent in showing that digital entrepreneurship is no frictionless path

for women. Four broad categories of challenge recur across recent studies, and each is considered in turn below.

The first concerns technological challenges. Fanelli [12] identifies insufficient digital skills, a lack of technological advisory support, and difficulty adapting to shifting platform requirements as persistent obstacles for small enterprises. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital adoption. At the same time, it exposed gaps in digital literacy and IT infrastructure, particularly for women-led micro and small enterprises [20].

The second concerns constraints on digital presence. Establishing and sustaining a credible online presence takes more than simply showing up online. Wang and Keane [30] describe a gendered digital divide that limits women's access to the high-speed connectivity and modern devices needed to remain visible on fast-changing platform algorithms. Building an audience is further complicated by what Ahmed et al. [3] term a "digital double bind," in which gendered expectations and resource constraints work together to suppress reach. Maintaining a consistent content output, meanwhile, is disrupted by household obligations and unreliable infrastructure [13].

The third concerns work-life balance. Brecht et al. [8] describe a dual burden facing high-growth women entrepreneurs. Digital tools that promise flexibility instead blur the boundary between home and work, producing what the authors term an "autonomy paradox," where greater connectivity paradoxically reduces control over one's own time. In Malaysia specifically, Selamat and Endut [25] describe women digital entrepreneurs as "bargaining with patriarchy." They adapt to prevailing gender norms around household duties and spousal permission in order to sustain their businesses, often at the cost of slower business growth and constrained decision-making authority. Role conflict, according to Tahir [28], is a near-universal experience among women entrepreneurs attempting to separate professional ambition from domestic obligation.

The fourth concerns market-related challenges. Waheed et al. [29] point to intense competition on social media, where the sheer number of similar offerings makes differentiation difficult. This is compounded by algorithm-driven advertising costs that tend to favour larger, established players. Trust is a related and equally persistent obstacle. Online buyers cannot physically inspect products before purchase, so a single negative comment can undermine months of reputation-building [23]. As a result, many women entrepreneurs are pushed toward a "customer is always right" posture that prioritises rapid, generous resolution of complaints.

C. Strategies for Overcoming Digital Entrepreneurship Barriers

The literature also documents a consistent set of strategic responses. Continuous learning, whether self-directed or through structured training and mentoring, has been shown to strengthen self-efficacy and help women break into male-dominated technical domains such as ICT [20], [16]. Gender-matched mentoring in particular has been associated with meaningful gains in business practice and profitability [16].

Strategic platform utilisation is a second recurring response. Successful women entrepreneurs tend not to maintain a presence everywhere. Instead, they concentrate effort on the platforms best matched to their audience and objectives, using cost-effective tools to reach markets that would otherwise require significant capital to access [18], [22]. Sustained digital marketing adoption, in particular, has been linked to more durable business growth over time [31]. Content strategy plays a complementary role here. Women entrepreneurs increasingly rely on personal, story-driven content to build an emotional connection with customers, and this substitutes for the trust conventionally established through physical retail [23].

A third pillar centres on how these women manage their relationships with customers. Direct, personal engagement, such as one-on-one consultations, quick responses to queries, and openly handling complaints rather than avoiding them, tends to build the kind of closeness with a brand that keeps customers loyal to women-led digital ventures [11], [22].

Finally, how these women manage their time and multiple roles helps them carry the dual load of running a business while meeting family obligations. Rather than keeping work and family strictly apart, many handle several roles at once. Structured scheduling, digital automation, and delegating tasks where possible are what

make it feasible to keep growing the business without giving up personal wellbeing [8], [15].

D. Government Policy and Support Programmes

Beyond the level of individual firms and entrepreneurs, government policy forms a further, structural layer shaping women's participation in the digital economy. Malaysia has gradually built this concern into its broader digital-economy agenda. This is most visible through the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint (MyDIGITAL) and, more recently, the MADANI Economy framework. Both explicitly pledge inclusive digital participation, promising to "leave no one behind" in the digital transition [35]. To put this pledge into practice, the Ministry of Digital, together with the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) and Digital Nasional Berhad, launched the EmpowerHER Digital programme. It combines interactive workshops, industry-sharing sessions, and mini exhibitions to equip B40 women entrepreneurs with digital business, branding, and financing skills, working alongside SME Corp Malaysia and private platforms such as Shopee and TikTok [39]. State-level initiatives mirror this national direction. In Sarawak, a multi-agency approach has sought to equip women entrepreneurs with digital and technopreneurial skills, anchored in the Sarawak Digital Economy Blueprint 2030 and the Post-COVID-19 Development Strategy 2030, with the state Ministry of Women among the agencies involved [34]. Cross-sector programmes complement these public efforts. Mastercard Strive Malaysia, delivered together with The Asia Foundation, was set up specifically to address the digitalisation challenges facing Malaysian micro and small women entrepreneurs. Its existence suggests that government effort alone has not been seen as enough to close the gaps that remain [38]. Sapiai et al. make a similar point. Government policies and support systems, together with family, community, and NGO involvement, are integral to shaping women entrepreneurs' access to funding and training, both in Malaysia and in comparable emerging markets [33].

Despite this expanding policy architecture, the literature consistently points to a gap between policy intent and lived experience for many Malaysian women digital entrepreneurs. Zainuddin et al. observe that despite the inclusive rhetoric of the MADANI Economy and the MyDIGITAL Blueprint, Indigenous Bidayuh women entrepreneurs in rural Sarawak still face digital exclusion, weak branding capacity, and restricted market access. This suggests that national digital-inclusion agendas do not automatically reach structurally marginalised women [35]. Quantitative evidence from rural Terengganu reinforces this concern. Mohamad et al. find that government support, on its own, does not have a statistically significant effect on digital entrepreneurship. It only becomes meaningful when combined with entrepreneurs' existing digital literacy, and its benefit shrinks further in rural areas where resources and knowledge are already limited [36]. Even Malaysia's own Ministry of Digital has acknowledged this shortfall. It notes publicly that although roughly 220,000 women entrepreneurs have moved into e-commerce, only about 12.63 per cent have received corresponding digital-skills training, a clear gap between participation and structured support [39]. Zainal Abidin's qualitative work with female Bumiputera food and beverage entrepreneurs likewise surfaces continuing bureaucratic and access-related obstacles, despite stated policy commitments [37]. The Asia Foundation's assessment of Malaysian micro and small women entrepreneurs identifies similar unresolved barriers around digitalisation and capacity [38]. Taken together, this body of work suggests that Malaysian policy has been well-articulated at the strategic level but uneven in implementation, particularly for rural, informal, and ethnically marginalised women entrepreneurs.

Viewed comparatively, Malaysia's experience sits within a wider Southeast Asian pattern. National digitalisation strategies for women entrepreneurs across the region are frequently gender-neutral in design, and therefore only partly responsive to women's specific constraints. In Indonesia, the government's Kartu Prakerja digital-skills training programme was not built as a women-targeted policy. Even so, it has become a de facto vehicle for addressing gender inequality in entrepreneurial outcomes, showing both the reach and the limits of mainstream, non-gender-specific digital support schemes [42]. Vietnam presents a similarly mixed picture. Christodoulou et al.'s interviews with Vietnamese women entrepreneurs find that although government support for women's entrepreneurship has grown, financial constraints, skill gaps, and limited institutional support continue to hold back business development. This is why the authors call for more targeted policy rather than assuming existing measures are adequate [40]. Maheshwari, Vu, and Pham Thanh add a theoretical dimension, mapping how macro-level institutional factors interact with meso- and micro-level barriers to shape Vietnamese

women's entrepreneurial paths. Their work underscores that supportive institutions alone are not enough without accompanying change at the firm and individual level [41]. Across Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, the Asian Development Bank's regional assessment of fintech-enabled access to finance finds that credit-access obstacles for women-owned enterprises persist despite growing digital financial infrastructure. Technology and government-backed financial inclusion agendas, in other words, have yet to close gender gaps in financing across the region [43]. Read alongside the Malaysian evidence, this comparative literature suggests that Southeast Asian governments increasingly see women's digital entrepreneurship as a policy priority. Turning that recognition into consistently effective, gender-responsive support, particularly around financing, targeted digital-skills training, and outreach to rural or marginalised groups, nonetheless remains an unresolved challenge across the region, not a uniquely Malaysian one.

E. Business Empowerment as an Outcome Construct

Business empowerment is most usefully understood as a multidimensional outcome rather than a single measurable state. Djaelani and Putra [32] describe empowerment as a process of building self-reliance, capability, and social participation through structured support. Setyaningrum et al. [26], meanwhile, frame it in terms of business independence, that is, the capacity of an enterprise to make autonomous, informed decisions without excessive external pressure. Applied to women digital entrepreneurs, empowerment has been shown to manifest along at least three dimensions. These are financial and economic gains; greater command over time and competing roles; and psychological and social gains in confidence, identity, and networks [9], [28].

F. Conceptual Framework

The literature, taken as a whole, suggests a sequential relationship: the challenges women digital entrepreneurs face shape the strategies they adopt, and these strategies in turn produce empowerment outcomes across economic, time-and-role, and psychological-and-social dimensions. This study does not treat empowerment as a predefined variable to be tested. It is conceptualised instead as an outcome that emerges from the lived interplay between challenge and strategic response, a framing consistent with recent calls for more process-oriented, context-sensitive research on women's digital entrepreneurship [14].

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive research design intended to capture the characteristics, conditions, and relationships surrounding business empowerment in digital entrepreneurship in a systematic and contextually grounded manner. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables higher richness and validity of findings, given that the phenomenon under study is inherently experiential and context-dependent [5].

B. Methodological Choice and Research Strategy

The study is grounded in an interpretivist and constructivist perspective, which treats meaning as something constructed through participants' lived context, rather than something to be measured against a predetermined scale [6]. A case-study strategy was adopted on the basis that case studies are particularly well suited to examining complex phenomena within their natural settings [21]. The research took the form of a multiple-case design built around four information-rich cases, each one giving a detailed, contextualised picture of the challenges faced, the strategies used, and the empowerment that followed.

C. Location, Sampling, and Data Collection

Data collection took place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital. The city was chosen for its advanced level of technological development and the correspondingly easier access to information-rich respondents. Participants

were selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability approach in which individuals are selected against criteria directly relevant to the research objectives [21]. The target population, successful women digital entrepreneurs, was set at four respondents, and four were in fact recruited and interviewed, meeting the intended sample size.

Given that “success” carries no single agreed definition in the literature, this study operationalised the term through four inclusion criteria, applied jointly during recruitment. The first concerned duration and channel. The entrepreneur had to have operated a digitally based business, defined as one relying on social media, e-commerce platforms, or direct-selling applications as a primary channel for marketing, sales, or customer engagement, for a minimum of two years. This threshold was set because two years is generally long enough for a business to move past its start-up phase and show sustained operation. The second criterion concerned growth. The business had to show demonstrable growth or scaling. This could be evidenced by markers such as a shift from part-time to full-time operation, an expansion from a single physical outlet to a digitally enabled or fully online model, or a visible increase in customer reach, output, or income over time. Third, the entrepreneur had to report a stable or growing income directly attributable to the digital side of the business, rather than income that was merely incidental to it. Fourth, she had to occupy a recognised position of standing within her market or organisation. This could take the form of an independent leadership rank within a direct-selling structure, professional recognition within her industry, or an established customer base built around her own digital brand. None of these four indicators was treated as sufficient on its own; a respondent had to satisfy all four before she was approached for interview. Candidates were first identified through professional and social-media networks, then cross-checked against the criteria using publicly visible business information such as years of operation, platform presence, and customer engagement, before formal invitations were extended. The four respondents ultimately recruited, WDE1 to WDE4, met every criterion. All had run their digital businesses for two years or more, with experience ranging from two to fifteen years. Each showed a clear growth trajectory. WDE1 built a dual academic-entrepreneurial career, WDE2 advanced to Independent Senior Sales Director status, WDE3 scaled a direct-selling venture alongside her clinical practice, and WDE4 shifted her business from a physical retail outlet to a fully online model. Each also reported sustained or growing income from her business, and each held recognised standing in her respective market, ranging from senior sales leadership to an established personal brand among repeat customers.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-person, in-depth interviews built around open-ended questions. This approach was chosen for its capacity to function as a “conversation with purpose” that allows knowledge to be co-constructed between researcher and participant [19]. Secondary data came from peer-reviewed books, journal articles, and online scholarly databases. These included Google Scholar, UTeM’s institutional library resources, ProQuest, Emerald Publishing, and ScienceDirect, searched using terms such as “digital entrepreneurship,” “business empowerment,” and “women digital entrepreneurs.” Data collection ran over ten months, from March 2025 to January 2026. This reflects a cross-sectional time horizon, where data were gathered once rather than tracked over time. The interviews were supplemented by direct observation of participants’ digital and social-media behaviour, which added context on nonverbal cues and platform-level dynamics [15].

The four respondents operated across three industries. WDE1 was a 42-year-old entrepreneur with fourteen years in the personal care and beauty sector, combining her business with an academic career teaching entrepreneurship. WDE2, aged 31, had eight years of experience as an Independent Senior Sales Director for an established global cosmetics brand and had grown her business from a part-time venture into a full-time career. WDE3 was a 28-year-old dentist who had built a health and wellness business through a direct-selling model over roughly two years alongside her clinical career. WDE4, the most experienced of the four at fifteen years, was a 50-year-old fashion retailer who had transitioned her women’s apparel business from a physical store to a fully online model, a shift accelerated by pandemic-era movement restrictions.

D. Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and translated from Bahasa Melayu into English where necessary; most transcriptions were completed within twenty-four hours to preserve accuracy and context. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, an approach used to identify, examine, and report recurring patterns of meaning across the dataset [29]. Codes were developed inductively from the transcripts and grouped into subthemes and themes corresponding to the two research objectives, challenges and strategies, before being connected to the emergent construct of business empowerment.

Trustworthiness was addressed through three complementary strategies. Credibility was strengthened through in-depth interviewing, verbatim quotation in the reporting of findings, and a simplified member-checking process in which interview summaries were shared back with participants for confirmation. Confirmability, in turn, was supported through reflexive documentation of the researcher's assumptions and the retention of raw transcripts and coding materials for traceability. Transferability was supported through detailed, descriptive accounts of participants and context. This allows readers to judge for themselves whether the findings apply to comparable settings, rather than relying on statistical generalisation.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Challenges Faced by Women Digital Entrepreneurs

1) Technological Challenges: Across all four cases, participants described an ongoing struggle to keep pace with the technical demands of digital business. Several respondents, early in their entrepreneurial journeys, felt they lacked a working understanding of content creation and platform mechanics. WDE3 explained: "it's a different social media approach. So, it's like I need more time to study each one." Beyond this initial learning curve, adapting to continuously changing platform rules created recurring friction. As WDE1 put it, "every platform has its owner, there are conditions, right? ... to understand the conditions on each platform." Her remark captures a simple reality: mastering one platform offered no guarantee of ease on the next.

2) Constraints of Digital Presence: Building a visible, credible online presence proved to be a distinct and persistent challenge. Low follower counts limited reach and made early growth difficult. WDE4 described the problem plainly: "even if we don't have followers, we have a problem. We have to find followers." This difficulty was compounded by the need to maintain a consistent content schedule alongside business operations and household duties. As WDE3 recalled, "one of the initial challenges that I think I remember until now is to be consistent in one platform." Her comment underscores just how central, and how difficult, consistency proved to be for early credibility.

3) Work-Life Balance Constraints: Two respondents in particular described work-life balance as a defining, and at times emotionally difficult, challenge. WDE1 spoke candidly about the toll of building her business through multiple pregnancies: "it's really heavy and tough for a woman where I'm pregnant and then pregnant and then breastfeeding, having to leave the baby. That's the hardest part in building a business, especially those first ten years." The always-on nature of digital business only added to this pressure. As she also reflected, "this hard work means I don't have time with my children. That is the past, that is the opportunity cost."

4) Market Challenges: Intense competition and fragile customer trust emerged as the two dominant market-related challenges. WDE3 described an industry saturated with similar offerings, where differentiation had come down to personality and presence rather than the product itself: "there are thousands of people there, so what differentiates us from others is what personality do we have?" Trust with online buyers proved just as hard to establish early on, since they cannot inspect a product before buying it. As she put it: "at first, when we had a hundred or two hundred followers, no one wanted to buy, because at that time people didn't even know us."

B. Strategies Applied by Women Digital Entrepreneurs

1) Continuous Learning: To close initial skill gaps, participants combined self-directed learning with more structured training. WDE3 described drawing on multiple informal sources: “some from my own team... then from TikTok itself because there are many TikTok teachers for all those things, right?” WDE2 went further, investing more deliberately in formal learning. As she put it: “I bought a book on TikTok marketing and stuff like that. I buy books, study. Sometimes I take classes.”

2) Strategic Platform Utilisation: Respondents did not spread their effort evenly across every available channel. They concentrated instead on the platforms delivering the strongest results. WDE4 was explicit about this calculus: “TikTok has the most customer feedback. TikTok generates the highest sales. As for Shopee, TikTok is indeed higher than Shopee.” Content, too, was deliberately designed to engage customers across multiple sensory registers. As WDE1 explained, her content sought to “cover three angles which is visual, the second is auditory, the third is kinesthetic... they see us demo putting it on their face and see what the results are.”

3) Customer Relationship Management: Personalised engagement emerged as a central strategy for building trust in the absence of face-to-face interaction. WDE2 described offering consultations ahead of any sale: “sometimes I will give a consultation. Before selling skincare, or any product, I give a consultation first, so they know they are communicating with someone they can trust, because it is a real person.” For WDE4, transparency during live-selling sessions was the key to building confidence in product quality: “during the live broadcast, we show the cutting, and the measurements. After that, we all show it up close to explain the features of the shirt in detail.”

4) Time and Role Management: Structured scheduling and automation allowed participants to manage competing demands without abandoning either business or family responsibilities. WDE2 described relying on a planner to protect family time deliberately: “it’s really flexible because I have a planner where I schedule what days I’m going out, what time. So I really do spend a lot of time with my family.” For WDE1, automation was what made this balance sustainable at scale. As she put it, “I am grateful that a lot of automation is happening nowadays which allows me, an entrepreneur, to have quality time with my family, with myself, with my team.”

C. Business Empowerment Outcomes

1) Economic Empowerment: Participants linked their digital entrepreneurship directly to concrete financial gains. One respondent described her early achievements this way: “I was able to buy my own house at the age of 25, get a free car with Mary Kay at the age of 25 also, and get a 5-figure income in Mary Kay at the age of 25.” This trajectory shows how digital-platform-based selling translated into real asset accumulation and income stability, and at a relatively early career stage.

2) Time and Role Empowerment: Beyond income, participants described a shift in how much control they had over their own time. WDE1 connected this directly to automation: “now in live, in two hours I can close thousands. I am grateful that a lot of automation is happening in this day and age, which allows me, an entrepreneur, to have quality time with my family, with myself, with my team.” Empowerment through digital entrepreneurship, then, was not only financial. It was also a reclaiming of time across competing roles.

3) Psychological and Social Empowerment: Participants also described gains in confidence, professional identity, and social standing. WDE3 reflected on how personal branding changed the way others recognised her: “when I started doing personal branding, people seemed to know who I am, like the dentist who speaks Terengganu and sells Shaklee. Thank you, doctor, this is what you’re willing to help me order.” WDE4, for her part, described staying connected to a wider professional and social current through digital platforms: “we follow this market, we follow the current market. The current market is mostly online. We follow the trend, we learn from that point of view.”

These three outcomes, taken together, suggest that business empowerment among the participants was not a

single achievement. It was an accumulating, mutually reinforcing set of gains: financial stability enabling greater autonomy, and autonomy in turn reinforcing confidence and professional identity.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that challenges and strategies are not separate stages in a woman digital entrepreneur's journey, but interrelated processes. Together, they determine whether digital entrepreneurship translates into business empowerment. The technological and digital-presence challenges reported by participants echo the broader literature's observation that digital entrepreneurship is inherently volatile and fast-changing [17], [27]. The added burden women face in acquiring digital skills without structured training reflects patterns already observed in Malaysian and comparable regional contexts [1], [24]. It also echoes the gendered work-life friction documented among digitally active women entrepreneurs more broadly [10]. The work-life balance difficulties described by WDE1 closely mirror the "bargaining with patriarchy" dynamic identified by Selamat and Endut [25], as well as the role-conflict patterns described by Tahir [28]. This points to something structural: these constraints appear to be built into how digital entrepreneurship is experienced by women in this context, rather than incidental to it. Market-related challenges, particularly the difficulty of establishing trust with online buyers, are consistent with earlier findings on saturation and credibility-building in digital marketplaces [29], [23].

The strategic responses observed, namely continuous learning, selective platform use, relationship-centred customer management, and structured time management, reinforce existing literature on digital literacy as a lifelong, iterative pursuit rather than a one-time achievement [20], [16]. They also support the value of concentrating effort on a smaller number of well-matched platforms rather than pursuing omnipresence [18], [22]. The data suggest, moreover, that these strategies worked together as an integrated response system rather than as isolated tactics. Platform selection informed content strategy, which in turn shaped how customer relationships were built and sustained.

The empowerment outcomes identified in this study, economic, time-and-role, and psychological-and-social, support the view that empowerment is best understood as a multidimensional, cumulative process rather than a single financial milestone [32], [26]. This extends prior work in a meaningful way. It suggests that digital entrepreneurship does more than generate income. It also functions as an empowering process, giving a woman entrepreneur firmer command over both her business and the wider circumstances of her life.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

A. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes qualitative, experience-grounded insight into how empowerment emerges from women's lived entrepreneurial experience. It extends a literature that has tended to concentrate on technology adoption and platform-performance metrics. The study reframes empowerment as a process-based, experience-driven outcome rather than a fixed variable to be tested. Technology adoption alone, it argues, cannot fully explain how women become empowered through digital entrepreneurship. A woman's own initiative, her capacity to recover from setbacks, and the deliberate choices she makes when facing specific obstacles carry just as much weight. This supports a broader case for more holistic, context-sensitive approaches to studying digital entrepreneurship and women's empowerment, particularly in non-Western settings that remain comparatively underexamined [14].

B. Practical Implications

For entrepreneurship support agencies and training providers, the findings point toward the value of situation-specific rather than generic programming. Interventions should treat technological adjustment, digital presence-building, market competition, and work-life balance as distinct but related needs. Building digital skills and platform-specific competencies should be paired with training in financial management, pricing, and cash-flow

planning to support sustainability, alongside communication and trust-building skills that strengthen customer relationships. Participants in this study were juggling multiple roles at once, as mothers, professionals, and business owners. Given this, interventions built around adaptable session timings, guidance from more experienced entrepreneurs, informal networks of women in similar positions, and affordable access to digital tools are likely to serve them better than a standard, one-size-fits-all programme. Stakeholders and policymakers seeking to support women digital entrepreneurs, more broadly, should align their mechanisms with these lived realities, rather than with assumptions about how digital business is conducted.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is subject to several limitations. Its qualitative design and small sample of four participants, drawn exclusively from Kuala Lumpur, means the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of women digital entrepreneurs elsewhere in Malaysia, particularly in semi-urban or rural areas with different levels of digital infrastructure. Some degree of interpretive bias is inherent to the analysis, as with qualitative research generally, and self-reported accounts may be shaped by memory or social desirability. These limitations were accepted as a trade-off for the depth and contextual richness that a small, information-rich sample allows. The intention, after all, was to generate nuanced insight rather than statistically generalisable findings. Future research would benefit from a larger sample and a broader geographic and industry scope, to test whether the challenges, strategies, and empowerment outcomes identified here hold in different settings. Replicating this design with more participants would also help establish how far the patterns observed here can be generalised.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand how a group of accomplished women running digital businesses in the Kuala Lumpur area experience the difficulties of digital entrepreneurship, and how their responses to those difficulties translate into business empowerment. “Successful” here means women who had sustained a digitally based business for at least two years, shown clear growth or scaling, achieved stable or growing income from that business, and attained recognised standing within their market. The four participants each faced a mix of technology-related hurdles, difficulties building an online presence, tension between work and family life, and pressures from the wider market. Even so, they each drew on a recognisable set of deliberate strategies, from continuous learning and careful platform choices to how they handled customers and how they organised their time and competing roles. These strategies sustained their businesses and produced empowerment across economic, time-and-role, and psychological-and-social dimensions. Digital entrepreneurship, in this light, is more than a technological or economic activity. It is an enabling process shaped by contextual circumstances, strategic adjustment, and lived entrepreneurial experience. Empowerment is best treated as an evolving process rather than a fixed destination, and this offers a more accurate account of how women navigate digital business over time. It also points to the importance of building supportive ecosystems, from training providers to policymakers, that help women digital entrepreneurs resolve the challenges they face and sustain the empowerment they have begun to build.

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CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Rahmawati Binti Rusdi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft.

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