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Understanding legitimacy building in contexts through digital entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper, through empirical evidence, presents a framework for exploring how entrepreneurs navigate the challenges of building legitimacy in a digital context. In so doing, this paper goes beyond the seemingly forgone conclusion that legitimacy is important for the entrepreneur's success by focusing on the contextualised mechanisms through which digital legitimacy is built.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Empirical findings are drawn from semi-structured interviews conducted with 21 digital entrepreneurs in Nigeria, a leading example of the West African context and analysed using a phenomenological approach.

Findings: The paper shows how digital entrepreneurs in a non-Western context draw on an aspect of legitimation in the digital space, and in particular, highlights three mechanisms via which this takes place, namely: digital shielding, digital curating, and digital networking. Presented via an inductive approach, the three mechanisms described in the paper provide a scaffold for thinking about and understanding entrepreneurial legitimacy within a contextual framework, which incorporates institutional, cultural and digital dimensions.

Originality/Value: This paper contributes to the literature on digital entrepreneurship by empirically identifying and theoretically elaborating themes that are important for understanding how entrepreneurs navigate the challenges of digital entrepreneurship and build entrepreneurial legitimacy in complex contexts.

Keywords: digital entrepreneurship, context, legitimacy building, digital shielding, digital curating

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEMATIZATION

The emerging literature on digital entrepreneurship (Bouncken and Kraus, 2022; Dy et al., 2017; Sussan and Acs, 2017; Kraus et al., 2018;) consistently indicates that success in digital enterprise is largely attributed to the degree of digitalisation, whilst it remains seemingly silent on how digital entrepreneurs go about constructing such success. This builds on a common understanding of the role of the entrepreneurs' experience (Hull et al., 2007) without specific emphasis on aspects such as legitimisation (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009; Überbacher, 2014; Suchman, 1995), which remain important, particularly when diverse demographics, or unexamined contexts are concerned (McAdam et al., 2018; Castelló et al., 2016). Equally, the extant literature highlights the type of opportunities pursued by digital entrepreneurship with less focus on the digital context in which these opportunities are created or discovered and subsequently pursued (Davidson and Vaast, 2010).

Thus, whilst the literature on digital entrepreneurship has duly explored the competitive elements of the digital enterprise such as business models, entrepreneurial processes, ecosystems, entrepreneurial strategies, entrepreneurial education and social entrepreneurship in digital contexts (Kraus et al., 2018), there are still gaps in our understanding of digital entrepreneurship in terms of context-related challenges which digital entrepreneurs face, with scant studies focussing on non-western contexts that may have unique conditions and therefore research insights (Welter, 2011; Ngoasong, 2018; Zahra et al., 2014; Xheneti, 2017). Some of the challenges faced by digital entrepreneurs in such contexts are the weak institutional structures allowing for operational obstructions (such as corruption), the inability to access funds, lack of policy and deficiency in digital competence and labour (Samara and Terzian, 2021).

Recent research has highlighted gaps in the digital entrepreneurship literature, including how it is conceptualised and how it is then coherently encompassed as a key component pillar in the emerging digital entrepreneurship ecosystem research (Sussan and Acs, 2017). Indeed, while Sussan and Acs, (2017) have developed a digital entrepreneurship ecosystem framework, there is a clear need for more nuanced conceptualisation under each of the four pillars. Admittedly, there are established gaps in terms of the research literature on digital entrepreneurship. Such

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gaps focus on enablers, outcomes, business models and market offerings within contexts and entrepreneurial ecosystems (Berger et al, 2019; Bouncken and Kraus, 2022; Essen et al., 2022).

Still, a reading of the literature on digital entrepreneurship suggests that three major perspectives in conceptualising the digital technologies aspect can be highlighted: (a) as an enabler of entrepreneurial pursuits, for example, in new venture creation (von Briel et al., 2018), (b) as an enabler of regulatory and technological advances within an institutional environment (Nambisan, 2016), and (c) as a context within which entrepreneurial opportunities occur and get enacted (Berger et al., 2019). Under the question of context within digital entrepreneurship, what constitutes legitimacy for digital entrepreneurs as a new class of entrepreneurs, and how such legitimacy is to be cultivated is scarcely addressed in the emerging literature (Castelló et al. 2016; Essen et al., 2022). In particular, the practices undertaken by entrepreneurs in operating, networking and enacting opportunities within the digital context remain underexplored. This gap motivates the need to closely examine how digital entrepreneurs build entrepreneurial legitimacy, not least because it matters in providing access to markets and resources (Kraus et al., 2018).

In addition, accounting for the nuanced experiences of entrepreneurs within diverse or complex contexts has the potential to contribute unique insights with novel theoretical elaborations. This paper therefore extends the problematisation annotated by Lechner et al., (2022) and addresses the research gap on how entrepreneurial actors gain legitimacy in a digital context located in Nigeria. Subsequently, from a contextualised perspective, this paper theorises three mechanisms through which entrepreneurs build legitimacy in new ways; the processes of digital shielding, curating digital footprints and networking provided personal and entrepreneurial strategies for them to gain presence, tackle endemic inequalities, and equip themselves with resources necessary to become resilient in their endeavours to gain legitimacy.

In this paper, we contribute to the growing field of digital entrepreneurship research via such a contextualised perspective which goes beyond the analysis that focuses on the underpinning technology (e.g. AI, platforms, media), to capture digital entrepreneurship practices and mechanisms of legitimacy building by entrepreneurs themselves, particularly in a complex non-Western context of Nigeria. In so doing, we also contribute to recent developments in terms of *contextualised entrepreneurship*, as we bring the ‘digital’ as a dimension of context to be considered alongside more established contextual aspects such as the institutional or the cultural.

The paper therefore aims to shed light on this aspect of digital entrepreneurship by empirically identifying dimensions of experience. In so doing the paper addresses the core research question: How do digital entrepreneurs navigate legitimacy-building in the digital space in a non-Western context?

To address this research question, this paper draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with 21 digital entrepreneurs and analysed using a phenomenological approach. Our analysis elaborates on three mechanisms through which digital entrepreneurs build legitimacy: digital shielding, digital footprint curation and digital networking. The paper is structured as follows: the theoretical framing is presented and the different contexts addressed in the study are highlighted; then the research design is presented including the data analysis method, followed by a presentation and discussion of findings, theoretical and practical implications and the outlining of future research.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Digital entrepreneurship

The advent of information, communication and digital technologies has influenced society greatly as these technologies have increasingly been incorporated into everyday life and business practice. To better understand the dynamics through which digital technologies become embraced in the mainstream business and social sphere, scholars have distinguished between digitisation and digitalisation. The concept of digitisation refers to the ‘technical process’ of ‘converting analog signals into a digital form, and ultimately into binary digits’ (Tilson et al., 2010; p.749). Digitalisation on the other hand, is ‘a sociotechnical process of applying digitizing techniques to broader social and institutional contexts that render digital technologies infrastructural’ (Tilson et al., 2010; p.748).

This advancement and application of digital technologies has fundamentally impacted the practice of entrepreneurship, not least by changing the context of entrepreneurship and how it is undertaken (Nambisan, 2016). This has given rise to a new form of entrepreneurship referred to as *digital entrepreneurship* (Carrier et al., 2004; Dy et al., 2017; Sussan and Acs, 2017). Indeed, while calls for empirical studies explicating how entrepreneurship is being influenced

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by the process of digitalisation remain valid (Sussan and Acs, 2017), emerging empirical evidence has demonstrated the various impacts digital technologies have had on the practice of entrepreneurship (Bouncken and Kraus, 2022; Dy et al., 2017).

Principally, however, through digitalisation not only have new business models emerged, but entrepreneurs have also had to deal with new challenges and opportunities presented by such digitalisation (Kraus et al., 2018). Within this context, digital technologies have significantly lowered barriers to entrepreneurship giving rise to what Zhao and Collier, (2016) called the ‘one-person companies’, at the very least enabling individuals to create their own jobs in the digital space (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017). At the same time, digital platforms and infrastructure has made many entrepreneurial activities such as market research, cost-effective and also opened up access to vast global resources and markets. The new intersection of digital technologies and entrepreneurship has thus been said to impact both the processes and outcomes of entrepreneurship (Nambisan, 2016). With much of the activity here largely yet in ferment, scholars have highlighted the need for new research towards a greater understanding of ‘entrepreneurial actions and outcomes in digital contexts’ (Beliaeva et al., 2019, p.268).

New opportunities notwithstanding, digital entrepreneurship presents new specific challenges too and the ways of coping with and navigating these are likely to be different from those applying in a non-digital entrepreneurship context (Kraus et al., 2018). Of these unique challenges, the level of uncertainty experienced in the digital world is a significant one, given the fluidity or ‘less bounded’ process and outcomes (Nambisan, 2016, p.1029). Furthermore, the ‘constant need’ to update digital skills, especially whilst also facing limited access to resources, and the experience of digital stress and burnout are significant challenges for digital entrepreneurs (Olsson and Bernhard, 2020, p.378). Effectively, these limitations pose a challenge to the building of legitimacy (Hair et al., 2012; Kraus et al., 2018; Lechner et al., 2022), with these issues pertaining to a topic that Kraus et al., (2018, p.369) observed has only been ‘marginally assessed’.

The above gaps in the extant literature make this area rife with research questions calling to be addressed, especially with empirical and contextual evidence. Table 1 below, based on the Hull et al., (2007) framework, further summarises ways in which authors in this field have discerned and emphasised aspects of digitalisation and highlights related opportunities for further theorising. The table is based on the Hull et al., (2007) framework and is driven by the level of digitalisation of activities and processes, although it does not encompass conceptualisations

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such as: the pursuit of opportunities (Davidson and Vaast, 2010), competitive elements of business for framing digital entrepreneurship (Hafezieh et al., 2011), structural and content factors of business (Kamalian et al., 2016), or type of digital technology involved (Nambisan, 2016). In particular, as Bouncken and Krauss (2022) also highlight, only little is known about how digital ventures build legitimacy, especially with the digital space considered as the context for such entrepreneurship.

Author(s)	Core theoretical Concept	Key theoretical point	Theoretical Opportunity
Hull et al., (2007)	Digitalisation of activities and processes	mild, moderate and extreme digitalisation of processes and offerings impacts on digital enterprise success	Success of the digital enterprise is attributed to the degree of digitalisation and seemingly silent on the ways in which digital entrepreneurs go about constructing such success. Role of the entrepreneurs' experience is stressed, without specific emphasis to aspects such as legitimisation
Davidson and Vaast, (2010)	Opportunities-driven	entrepreneurship in digital is understood according to the opportunities pursued which could be business opportunities, knowledge opportunities or institutional opportunities	Seeming emphasis on the type of opportunities pursued with less focus on the context in which these opportunities are created or discovered and pursued.
Hafezieh et al., (2011)	Competitive elements of digital enterprise	strategic positioning such as unique offerings and being different is a key aspect of a framework for understanding digital entrepreneurs	Focus on the competitive elements of the digital enterprise ignores the fact that there are challenges too which in turn precipitates the question of how digital entrepreneurs navigate the challenges of a digital context

Table 1: Degree of digitalisation within a context and ensuing theoretical opportunities – insights from extant literature (Authors own, 2022)

Legitimacy building in entrepreneurship

A key issue in this regard is the question of legitimacy building within digital entrepreneurship, a topic that has only received scant attention in the literature. Recent work by, for example, Castelló et al., (2016) examined the digital infrastructure of social media and identified strategies enabled by digitalisation which can help overcome the limitations of traditional legitimacy (Thomas et al. 2022; Lechner et al., 2022). However, other research suggests that where digital entrepreneurs fail to conform to prevailing logics or fail to communicate conformity with such norms, they are bound to experience legitimacy barriers (MacAdam et al., 2018). This may include situations where there is limited take up of a certain form of digitalisation and engagement with social media (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2018), or in cases where entrepreneurs operate in field peripheries (Van Lente, 2012).

Entrepreneurs' success is conceptualised as an outcome of legitimacy (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009). Legitimacy is a concept developed in sociology that accounts for the compliance of individuals and groups to expected social norms and defines what is “desirable” within societies and groups (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Schuman, 1995). Legitimacy enables entrepreneurs to access markets, and innovate in their field (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021). Legitimacy is socially embedded (Wry et al., 2011) and reflects a process of alignment with socially-accepted norms, which enable entrepreneurs to access resources (Pollack et al., 2017). Importantly, legitimacy can be pursued, gained, maintained and defended (Suddaby et al., 2017).

Entrepreneurs face the challenge of building legitimacy for their businesses and for themselves as founders (Swail and Marlow, 2014). To build legitimacy, entrepreneurs must be perceived to comply with the normative expectations of the context in which they operate. Thus, to gain legitimacy, entrepreneurs engage in an ongoing process of legitimation (Chalmers and Shaw, 2017) which includes a set of legitimacy-building practices (Voronov and De Clercq, 2009; Deephouse and Suchman, 2008; Díez-Martín et al., 2013; Suddaby et al., 2017). Furthermore, to align with socially-accepted values and norms in their context, entrepreneurs engage in processes of adapting their behaviours and practices to the expectations of the wider society and relevant stakeholders (Voronov and De Clercq, 2009; Pollack et al., 2017). This can include the way entrepreneurs represent themselves, dress and interact (Swail and Marlow, 2014) and

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fit within networks (Lassalle and Shaw, 2021), so they can “fit in” (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009). Yet, entrepreneurs also look to innovate and “stand out” (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009).

Thus, in this research, entrepreneurial legitimacy is understood as a process, condition or behaviour reflecting alignment with normative and regulatory norms of the context in which entrepreneurship is taking place. This includes the perception that entrepreneurs and their actions of entrepreneurial pursuits are desirable within the context. Overcoming limitations of the traditional offline legitimacy (Lechner et al., 2022), digital entrepreneurship brings new challenges and opportunities to entrepreneurs, including in their interactions with stakeholders (Thomas et al., 2022). The mechanisms through which digital entrepreneurs build legitimacy still require further investigation and theorisation, especially in different social and national contexts.

Contextualised perspectives in entrepreneurship

Context, understood as either the constraints, opportunities, situations, circumstances, conditions or environments impacting entrepreneurial processes and behaviours (Welter, 2011; Ngoasong, 2018; Hong et al., 2014), illuminates the entrepreneurial phenomena helping us to understand different outcomes stemming from entrepreneurial behaviour (Zahra et al., 2014). Understood in social, spatial, institutional and societal dimensions, the advancement of digital technologies suggests scope for expanding Welter, (2011)’s notion of context (Zaheer et al., 2019). Whilst seeing the digital as context (Berger et al., 2019), the focus is on interpreting actions, outcomes and experiences in the context of the digital world. The experiences of entrepreneurs are contextualised in the digital (Thomas et al., 2022). Indeed, there is an interplay of contexts and entrepreneurial activities (Lassalle and Shaw, 2021) for which the digital is no exception. The question of ‘where’ entrepreneurship occurs (Welter, 2011) influences what entrepreneurs can achieve in their different contexts. The digital can thus be conceptualised as an additional layer within the multi-dimensionality of contexts in entrepreneurship (Bouncken and Kraus, 2022; Kraus et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2022;). To appreciate the nuances related to studying a diverse, complex, non–Western context, we need to give due consideration to physical and institutional aspects too.

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The data of the present study was collected in Nigeria, a context characterised by institutional complexity, which combines government interest in digital entrepreneurship despite the macro and normative institutional challenges faced by its population. The macro complexities such as lack of infrastructure, difficulties of doing business and political challenges (World Bank, 2019a), technology investments focused on urban areas (World Bank, 2019b) and the existence of normative pressures such as women expected to play subjugated roles and care for the family (Mordi et al., 2010; Atsede and Adebimpe, 2004) are all part of the contextual make-up of the country. In addition to accommodating successful digital businesses, ‘Nigeria is also home to several high-growing digital companies that provide hopeful examples of its digital potential’ (World Bank, 2019; p.50).

Furthermore, as digital entrepreneurship is a government priority in Nigeria, networks seeking to help women navigate digital entrepreneurship are emerging in the country (World Bank, 2019); this background suggests the potential for insights to be gained from a subset of entrepreneurs previously overlooked by digital entrepreneurship literature, whilst also following ongoing calls for understanding female entrepreneurship from the global south (James, 2012; Ramadani et al., 2015). Due to the country’s size, the development prospects of Africa are tied to what happens in Nigeria (British Council, 2012; World Bank, 2020; Ochai et al., 2020). With 49% of Nigeria’s population being women (World Bank, 2019; Ochai et al., 2020), it is estimated that women own or manage about 25 to 30 percent of formally registered businesses (Halkias et al., 2011) - an astounding 23 million female entrepreneurs (PwC, 2020). Given the empirical evidence that Nigeria has the largest consumers of internet on the continent, the country is home to ecosystems supporting regional digital entrepreneurship in locations such as Lagos and Abuja (World Bank, 2019b). The digital ecosystem in Lagos has been valued at more than \$2billion with three of the digital businesses in Lagos including Flutterwave, Interswitch and Jumia valued at a minimum of \$1billion each (Segal, 2016; Ramachandran et al., 2019; UNCTAD, 2019; FMCDE, 2019).

Whilst *digital as a context* research is still in its early stages, emerging questions focus on how digital technologies shape ‘who can (or cannot) be an entrepreneur’ and in what ways entrepreneurship is being pursued in digital contexts (Berger et al., 2019; p.5). Following Welter (2011), we argue that *context matters*, but we go beyond the desirability for contextual interpretation of research findings. Rather, given the advancement of digital technologies as an external environmental enabler for entrepreneurship (Kimjeon & Davidsson, 2022), there is

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scope for expanding Welter's (2011) notion of context from the physical, social, spatial, institutional and societal to include the digital world (Zaheer et al., 2019). Furthermore, recognising that entrepreneurship is embedded within multiple dimensions of context including temporal, industry and market, spatial, social and organisational, ownership and governance dimensions of context and their institutional underpinnings (Zahra et al., 2014), researchers must interpret entrepreneurial actions within the context of the digital world too. In the context of our research, entrepreneurial actions are embedded in the digital ecosystem, a network of interdependent actors working together to achieve a purpose (Sussan and Acs, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

Methodology of the study

Participating entrepreneurs in the study were purposefully selected based on predetermined inclusion criteria, and this purposive strategy (Patton, 2002) enabled the selection of information-rich participants. We adopted a one-to-one, in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interview process informed by a phenomenological approach (Rubin and Rubin, 2011; Creswell, 2012). The data collected was analysed using the Colaizzi, (1978) method, which helped us effectively navigate the space of *description vs interpretation*, a fundamental tension in phenomenology by allowing us to understand both the direct experience of the entrepreneurs and the elements that could be interpreted and form the basis of the theoretical framework.

As noted by Creswell (2012; p.206) one of the objectives of the purposeful strategy is to 'give voice to the 'silenced' people', where 'data are collected from the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon' (Creswell, 2012; p.61) thus highlighting the aim of the participant recruitment as that of selecting digital entrepreneurs who operate digitally. The lead researcher identified participants and conducted interviews until theoretical saturation, that is, when no novel themes were emerging (Klag and Langley, 2013; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021). This point was reached after 21 digital entrepreneurs had been interviewed. Given the explorative nature of the study, as digital non-Western contexts such as Nigeria are not much explored, participants were selected in different sectors in which digital practices are enacted, as representative of digital practices in their industry.

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Whilst the larger study was conducted amongst female digital entrepreneurs, the aim of this paper is to understand experiences of digital entrepreneurship in the Nigerian context and theorise the legitimacy building mechanisms which emerged from the data analysis. The focus on digital entrepreneurs from Nigeria is in response to the call for more research in non-western contexts to further understand entrepreneurship in these contexts (Ramadani et al., 2015). Furthermore, the Nigerian government is supporting digital enterprises through its investments in hubs and incubators as Nigeria's digital economy is noted to expand with its digital ecosystem in Lagos valued at \$2billion US dollars (Ramachandran et al., 2019; UNCTAD, 2019; FMCDE, 2019).

Given this background, the continued absence of empirical understanding of digital entrepreneurs in this context leaves a gap in our understanding of digital entrepreneurship. As the focus was on digital entrepreneurs, participants were identified through a web search which included LinkedIn, Google, and Twitter. The aim was to recruit participants who had experience in digital entrepreneurship and could provide a description of building legitimacy as digital entrepreneurs. As such, following Jones, (2019), participants who identified as digital entrepreneurs on their profile pages were contacted via social media and emails. Participants were selected in line with sampling approaches which align with qualitative studies examining new ventures (Chalmers and Shaw, 2017; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021). This study is part of a broader research project, for which participants were all female active in digital enterprises. Thus, inclusion criteria focused on participants who enacted digital entrepreneurship (for example, digital engagements with customers/suppliers/partners/general public audience, etc.) within 12 months before the interview (Marlow and McAdam, 2015).

This research was conducted using online qualitative interviews, which established a relevant way to approach and interview professionals operating in the digital space, despite limitations due to the lack of physical proximity with the participants (Dowling et al., 2016). Establishing rapport was a challenge. The researcher addressed this anticipatorily by offering participants the option to choose to be interviewed using the digital tools which the participants felt most comfortable with (Salmons 2016). The average interviews lasted 1 hour and 45 minutes. Interviews were conducted online for all participants between May and August 2019: the majority of participants used their phones to access either Skype, WhatsApp, Zoom, or Facebook video and/or audio calls. Online interviews bring some technical limitations due to

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internet connections or the lack of immediacy, yet, they also enable access to participants in their preferred setting, helping to establish rapport.

To enable the researcher to portray legitimacy building as described by the digital entrepreneurs, the lead researcher reflected on the assumptions brought to the research (Dowling et al., 2016). In so doing, the lead researcher engaged in bracketing their prior knowledge. This was achieved by making apparent and acknowledging extant knowledge acquired by the lived experience of the researcher. It was important that this would be rendered as non-influential (Giorgi, 2007) by minimizing the influence of the researcher's own lived experience on the research.

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

Table 2: Participants of the Study

Data Analysis and Theorisation

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Although firmly based on a phenomenological approach, which allowed us to have a full account of the personal experience of digital entrepreneurs, we have made sure that we moved beyond the level of pure or 'naïve' description, which has often been the main critique of phenomenological approaches (Moustakas, 1994). To do that, we adopted a combination of inductive and abductive reasoning, two of the main modes of meaning-making from data (Kelle, 2014). Our approach has been abductive in that empirical data was considered in tandem with extant theory and theoretical elements (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Gioia et al., 2013; Klag and Langley, 2013). The data structure capturing the experience of the entrepreneurs was generated from empirical evidence to make inferential statements (Cope, 2005; Steyaert, 1997).

Following the Colaizzi (1978) method, we developed the analysis via the following steps: reading the transcripts; extracting significant statements; formulating meaning for each extracted statement; clustering meaning units into themes; integrating resulting themes into rich descriptions of the phenomenon; reducing themes to an essential structure of the phenomenon (as displayed in the data structure Figure 1), and finally returning to participants for either conducting further interviews or validating the research findings. Our approach incorporated an initial pilot phase to practice the method and explore potential issues that could arise in further data collection. Also, it involved interrogating presuppositions, collecting descriptions of the lived experience, and transcribing the data (as per Colaizzi, 1978). Finally, we verified the research findings with participants, having ensured at the onset of the research that an executive summary of the research findings would be emailed to all of them.

Aiming for a description of the essential schema of the phenomenon as experienced by the research participants was desirable as the research goal and output (Cope, 2005; Hycner, 1985; Creswell, 2012), and the integration of common meaning units or themes from which the schema was derived was able to be explained in relation with extant research on the phenomena (Cope, 2005; Hycner, 1985) to inductively develop theory models and frameworks, drawing on a weave between findings and extant literature (Klag and Langley, 2013). Drawing on inferences, the findings were analysed into an essential schema statement which is enfolded in literature (Cope, 2005), and theory elaboration via construct splitting, new construct specification and structuring relations (Fisher and Aguinis, 2017).

The complementarity of using Colaizzi's (1978) and Gioia et al.'s (2013) methodological approaches in our study is important; Colaizzi's method tackles systematically the fundamental challenge of phenomenology as an applied method, namely, circumscribing the boundaries

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between description and interpretation, which in a phenomenological sense can often remain elusive; this is done via establishing thematic relationships between emergent themes that derive from participants' experience via significant statements (Wirihana et al., 2018). The subsequent use of Gioia, (2013) enhances the interpretivist nuances that derive as the phenomenological loops of description and theme elicitation are completed, and provide further analytical power in terms of more elaborate thematic possibilities.

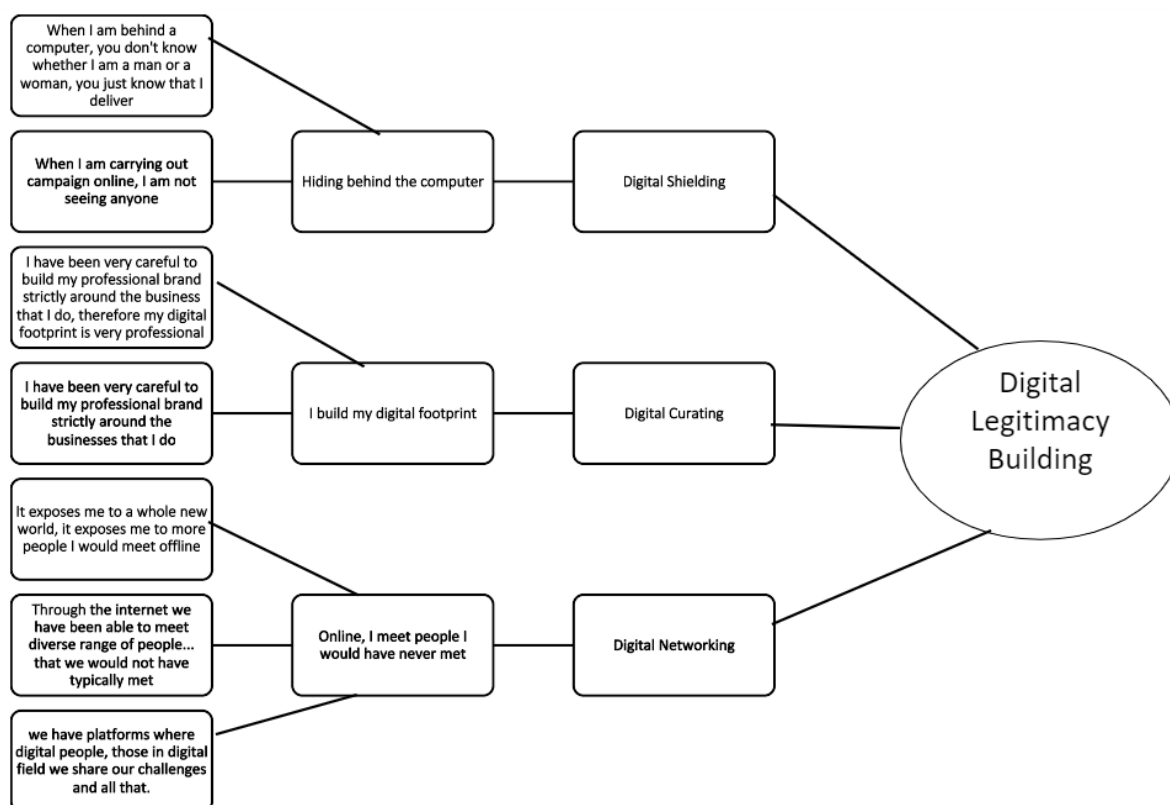


Figure 1: Summative and indicative figure of the phenomenological process /data structure

FINDINGS

In undertaking entrepreneurship within the digital space, digital technologies present a novel dimension of context, which interacts with other dimensions of contexts within which entrepreneurship happens (Welter, 2011). The digital context however presents a range of new legitimacy-related challenges and opportunities for entrepreneurs that impact entrepreneurial behaviour and action. This research demonstrates three complementary mechanisms entrepreneurs employ to navigate the challenges and opportunities the digital context presents

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towards building legitimacy in such a context. These are: digital shielding, digital curating, and digital networking. Digital entrepreneurs deploy these iterative mechanisms to build legitimacy, therefore navigating the digital to overcome contextual institutional and cultural barriers and challenges, as well as sense and enact opportunities.

Digital shielding

The first mechanism identified during the study is digital shielding. We observed that entrepreneurs use the protection provided by the digital screen to prevent judgemental perceptions of their appearance, as these perceptions would affect their interactions with stakeholders. In the context of Nigeria, the appearance of entrepreneurs, especially female entrepreneurs, can be particularly problematic when trying to engage with business partners, such as suppliers or clients, or with potential funders. The cultural normative expectations based on appearance are navigated by digital entrepreneurs by operating under relative anonymity behind the screen. Through the protection guaranteed by the screen, relative anonymity and lack of direct visual engagement and contact, digital entrepreneurs are able to operate without the perceptual judgements on their appearance, clothing, make-up, haircut, etc.

Iniedo, for example, observes: “I look younger than my age, I have a small stature, people tend to underestimate me, people don't expect much from me”. She adds that, although she has previously used that to surprise clients by overdelivering against the lower expectations they had of her, she has found that undervaluation “really does get to me” and can be “demotivating”. However, now as an online business, she can avert such issues and focus on her job.

The anonymity behind the computer screen protects the entrepreneur from what Omotolani described as being “physically judged”. Working behind digital technology provides entrepreneurs with the flexibility of projecting themselves the way they want to be seen thus enabling the entrepreneurs to control expectations for building legitimacy. Digital shielding is therefore the first protection provided by the digital space, which entrepreneurs use as a safeguard against institutional and cultural normative pressures.

Whilst the Internet is also a gendered and difficult space to navigate, in a business context, it also enables entrepreneurs to hide certain personal information (in terms of image and direct exposure) behind the digital screen, and focus on business matters and thereby enact

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opportunities they otherwise would not access. For example, Eniola demonstrates how she is able to employ her capabilities and deliver for customers in ways she otherwise would struggle to without the digital shield:

“When I am behind the computer, you don’t know whether I am a man or a woman. all you know is that I deliver, so it’s more like it gives a level playing field because you can’t see me... The biases that people have will not come to play because you don’t even know who the person is, all you know is that I gave this person the job and he or she was able to do it.” (Eniola)

In providing this protection, the digital context itself thus becomes an enabler, providing opportunities for previously excluded or restricted entrepreneurs that would otherwise have found it difficult, or indeed prohibitive, to build legitimacy without such protection.

As described in the instances above, digital technologies provide digital entrepreneurs with the platform to be shielded from not being taken seriously. Being behind the technology enables entrepreneurs to control expectations in the pursuit of legitimacy. In so doing, as a mechanism of building legitimacy, digital shielding levels the playing field and protects from social judgement, such as appearances, and controls reputation building, thus enabling the entrepreneur to cope with societal expectations.

Eniola was confident that behind the computer, it was not easy to tell whether she was male or female while other participants had chosen to refer to her status in her organisation in a way that does not immediately reveal that potential clients are interacting directly with the founder. Findings confirm observations by McAdam et al., (2019); entrepreneurs draw on digital technologies to transcend the expected behaviour in given cultural contexts where they are expected to perform a particular role as women and more generally as entrepreneurs.

“When I am carrying out a campaign online, I am not seeing anyone, I am simply making payment, I am setting what I want the campaign to do, whether to go to my website, or get me clicks, or get me likes, and it’s all computerized.” (Omotolani)

“I can put on a lot of makeup, look older, look this, look that, and kind of package myself to be this woman, not challenging, not crazy... not argumentative.” (Lutoni)

Digital shielding suggests digital entrepreneurs are able to negotiate everyday offline challenges in the online environment by developing their own preferred reputation online to build legitimacy. The cover provided from working in a digital technology context also enables entrepreneurs to navigate stakeholder expectations. Building legitimacy involves convincing stakeholders and the business environment in Nigeria relies on relationships in that business

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decisions could be made with the underpinning notion of returning or expressing gratitude for past favours. Participants describe being able to carry out their entrepreneurial activities behind their computers with clients they have never spoken with nor seen as Iniedo says:

“I have so many customers I never spoke with, I never saw, we just trusted ourselves and we did business together and these are people that I know that on a normal day they would see me [and think] oh she cannot do this, I just think she won't be able to do that. so I think that cover or the fact that they can't see is very helpful.” (Iniedo)

In the Nigerian cultural and institutional contexts, stakeholders would normatively see participants and judge their ability to deliver on business promises based on their perception. The reliance on relationships in the non-digital context would require face-to-face meetings with stakeholders. The digital enables entrepreneurs to navigate the barrier by conducting these meetings behind digital screens. Legitimacy can be built online and entrepreneurs can overcome physical limitations to build legitimacy which transcends online. By virtue of digital shielding, female digital entrepreneurs particularly can overcome contextual barriers to build legitimacy for themselves and their enterprise without a male counterpart on the team. In addition, in contexts where government institutions can have constraining influences (Welter and Smallbone, 2011), digital technologies provide protection from such constraints. As Iniedo notes: “Because it's just you and your internet, or Instagram page which the Nigerian government cannot see [seize] right now.” (Iniedo)

Digital curating

Beyond affording a protection mechanism, the digital context also provides entrepreneurs with the tools to further control what information about them is available out there and therefore what they are associated with. We observed that digital entrepreneurs cautiously engage with the digital, controlling the information that they put online to build a certain online profile. By carefully curating their digital footprint, entrepreneurs are able to build legitimacy by shaping expectations of who people think they are, and therefore build trust, a professional image, and other legitimacy signals, based on what they make available about themselves in the digital space. Such cautious engagement with the digital is the following step for our participants.

“I have been very careful to build my professional brand strictly around the businesses that I do.” (Deola)

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“And also, it helps validate you and so of course because everything you do, I mean there is this footprint, if you try to do it the right way.” (Chioma)

Some digital women entrepreneurs thus elect to develop digital personalities that conform to societal expectations of female entrepreneurs based on their gender while others build digital footprints that shroud their gender online such that it is not easy to tell whether they are male or female. Yet others label their roles in their organisations in a way that does not immediately reveal that potential clients are interacting directly with the founder. Our findings show that curating digital footprints allow entrepreneurs to build and enhance their legitimacy by taking control of and shaping what should be expected of them to be taken seriously as entrepreneurs in ways that are only available in the digital context.

Deolas’ offline profile supported her with building her digital footprint in that being a mother helped her connect with her audience online and the industry in which her enterprise was located aligned with her extant lifestyle as a mother and related norms around that. For Uchechi, the entrepreneur is considered an authority in her field because the digital footprint the entrepreneur developed, by building a community and sharing content, fostered online legitimacy which is made apparent offline through the trust expressed in her as an entrepreneur by her offline audience. The entrepreneur’s online legitimacy engendered legitimacy offline as she is trusted offline because of the content she provides online to her audience. Thus, for the entrepreneur, the legitimacy built online when transferred offline also fosters legitimacy offline. The experience of Lutoni suggests that the transference of online legitimacy offline can be used in building legitimacy offline as the entrepreneur drew on digital footprints to shape expectations before meetings offline. Others also emphasise the benefits of a digital presence in building a profile.

“Without the internet, I would have needed money to portray myself in a certain way so the internet has given me the opportunity to have a company without spending a lot of money.” (Kayin)

Entrepreneurs use digital content to craft and publish their own stories digitally using emails, articles, and posts on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. They mention the importance of portraying themselves through the information they make available on the internet and highlighted the need to be in control of the information about themselves to be taken seriously:

“You are in control of what you put on the internet and how you can be reached. It helps with how you can portray yourself, how people search for you [...] That is how the

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internet basically helps with being taken seriously as a business versus just being offline.” (Halima)

Participants manage trust expectations by projecting a well-crafted perception of the digital entrepreneurs they want to portray, allowing them to be “in control of their own narrative” (Uchechi).

“I mean, that is the basis of me being an entrepreneur right now because if I’m going to even describe myself as an entrepreneur, I would rather say I am a digital entrepreneur, you know, so almost everything I do and I think about it’s—I think about it on how to relate to the audience that I have online.”(Tolani)

“I think it also allows me to position myself the way I want to be positioned. For example, the LinkedIn thing you asked me about, why did I call myself a project leader as opposed to a CEO and managing director, it allows anyone who is looking for me to see me how I want to be seen as opposed to how I really am.” (Lutoni)

Digital footprints left by stakeholders of the business in the form of testimonial posts, feedback and recommendations provide credibility online and enable the participants to tell their story the way they want it crafted and by so doing shape expectations. Furthermore, while participants are aware of their digital footprint, they also check the digital footprints of stakeholders they engage with. Thus, in advance of physical meetings, they are able to tailor their story and build credibility that goes ahead of them before physical meetings. Digital curating thus helps entrepreneurs build legitimacy in multiple and adaptable ways that are simply unavailable outside the digital context.

Digital Networking

Extant female entrepreneurship research suggests that women are restricted in how they access networks (Pergelova et al., 2019; Naguib and Jamali, 2015). However, the findings of this research suggest that digital entrepreneurs are able to navigate these restrictions using digital technologies. Indeed, participants’ descriptions of online networking tell a story of relatively straightforward access to diverse networks that helps overcome traditional challenges and build legitimacy. One respondent, Deola, recounts the impact digital technology had on her decision to commit to entrepreneurship full-time.

“One of the challenges I faced in deciding to come into my business full-time was the concern that I did not have an adequate network [which is essential] in business circles,

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to be able to make a success out of this... the solution to that concern was effectively answered by social media and the internet really, so the people that I did not have access to all I need to do was just as I'm doing like we are having this [online] conversation, is to research a company that I would like to work with, find out the name of their senior executives and send them a direct message". (Deola)

A key advantage of the ability to send digital messages directly is that it averts traditional access barriers. As Uchechi notes, in the digital space, concerns such as "if the gateman lets you enter the compound" in the first place are limited. Moreover, such access opportunities are much wider in the digital sphere allowing the ability to grow large diverse networks easily. As Remi, adds:

[digital technology] "gave us a good community for us to work with in growing the company, developing the brand... through the internet we have been able to meet a diverse range of people... that we would not have typically met". (Remi)

Indeed, respondents demonstrated how they complementarily employed their digital shielding and curation activity to control perceptions and expectations as they sought to access networks and cultivate relationships that they otherwise would not have managed to. Uchechi notes:

"With digital media, if you know your way around it, if you have been able to build your profile in a very, very interesting way, you can sit in your house, no matter how low or high you think you're and be chatting with the CEO of somewhere, and they pick an interest in you and you get an appointment, and you're there and you're talking business, you're—even if you're not talking business, you're building relationships and networking". (Uchechi)

Our findings indicate further that digital technology helps entrepreneurs enhance legitimacy while networking digitally by allowing them to equip themselves with knowledge, skills and information that enhances not just the way they come across as competent professionals but the richness of their engagements. Most respondents provided examples of situations where they self-taught a variety of skills online which has enhanced their competencies and credibility in a range of technical and mundane areas, all of which enhances their legitimacy in the networks they engage in.

Many digital entrepreneurs are also part of impersonal networks with successful entrepreneurs and personalities they consider to be remote mentors simply because they look up them, have met them at events or seen on social media, or follow their YouTube channels for advice, inspiration and encouragement. Tolani for example observes:

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“Looking at their lives and how they navigate their business, I learn one or two things from them...how they behave, how they relate, how they interact and how they have been able to comport themselves in this very, very funny industry”. (Tolani)

Technology also enhances how entrepreneurs engage personally with actual mentors and peers, online or subsequently offline, enabling them to grow their legitimacy and networks further.

Ganiyat notes:

“I had a mentor who trained me on digital space, who was very courageous and he has been the one encouraging us back then when we were working with him, he kept telling us there is nothing impossible, so that faith, I built that faith, I joined other digital organisations on WhatsApp platform we have platforms where digital people, those in digital field we share our challenges and all that. So I get more encouragement from what others are doing so I keep moving forward”. (Ganiyat)

When networking engagements translate from impersonal to personal online, or indeed in person, entrepreneurs are able to research their networking peers in advance and prepare for engagements accordingly. Lutoni captures this dynamic very well in her quote:

“Unless it’s a private profile [you determine the kind of person you are meeting, before you get there]. You know, some of the comments they make on other people pages, the pictures they take, those kinds of things, those are some of the research I do before I go into any meeting. or see if there is any stories about them”. (Lutoni)

We also find that digital entrepreneurs employ technology to enrich conversations and thus gain legitimacy by presenting as proficient professionals. Chioma, for example, adds that prior to networking,

“Google is always my friend. By the time I do ten searches, I would start finding something that looks like what I think it is, and then I can use that as a kind of a backbone to now develop more, and further questioning”. (Chioma)

Thus, findings reveal three mechanisms through which entrepreneurs build legitimacy in new ways; the processes of digital shielding, curating digital footprints and networking providing personal and entrepreneurial strategies for them to gain presence, tackle endemic inequalities, and equip themselves with resources necessary to become resilient in their endeavours to gain legitimacy.

DISCUSSION: BUILDING DIGITAL LEGITIMACY

Entrepreneurs in the digital context can be seen to harness and build legitimacy, through the use of digital technologies, which, in turn, shapes expectations and perceptions; digital technology also becomes an enabler, a tool for navigating barriers, protection and control, and a way to enhance engagements and open doors to new networks and opportunities. As displayed in our proposed framework (see Figure 2), our analysis shows that the emergence of legitimacy is enabled by protection (through digital shielding), then leads to cautious engagement (through curating), which eventually allows for the emergence of legitimacy through building and operating in different network formats.

Digital legitimacy building process

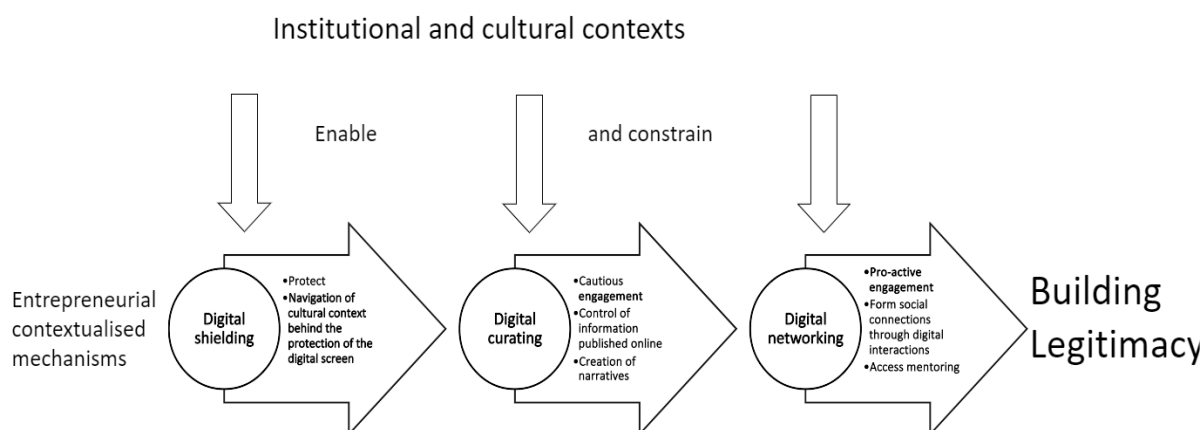


Figure 2: Digital legitimacy-building process framework (Authors own, 2022)

The model in Fig 2.2 has been developed through a recursive and iterative weave between findings and extant literature, following Klag and Langley, (2013). In so doing emergent themes from descriptions obtained from participants are compared with extant literature in the emergent digital entrepreneurship field and the wider entrepreneurship following (Cope, 2005; Wirihana et al., 2018).

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Operating behind digital screens, digital entrepreneurs are able to shield themselves from perceptual and normative judgements- including on their appearance- which could be impeding their entrepreneurial outcomes. These judgements relate to context-specific perceptions of class, level of education or gender- and this has been heavily the case with women entrepreneurs (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Mordi et al., 2010; Pailot et al. 2017; Carter et al, 2015), as in fact, inequalities are often replicated online (Dy et al., 2018). Our findings show that in the context of a normative patriarchal structure, such as the complex institutional and cultural context of Nigeria, digital entrepreneurs shield themselves and forestall key barriers to entrepreneurial legitimacy. Digital shielding has allowed these entrepreneurs to navigate normative barriers of being looked down upon, being underestimated, not being taken seriously and from other interfering societal expectations. Our findings highlight the importance of context, which incorporates several elements, including but not limited to gender (Marlow et al., 2018). By enabling the navigation of barriers, digital shielding levels the playing field for diverse and vulnerable entrepreneurs (female, ethnic minorities, etc.), and allows them to cope with societal expectations which can hinder building legitimacy (Bourne and Calás, 2013) and entrepreneurial activities (Lassalle and Shaw, 2021).

Digital shielding further suggests that entrepreneurs negotiate everyday offline challenges within the online environment by protecting themselves from normative pressures by operating online, in a digital computerised environment, in which they reduce face-to-face interactions. Such online interactions are a step to building legitimacy through digital means rather than through direct and personal interactions which could lead to normative barriers. Digital shielding thus, as a process, highlights how digital technologies enable the navigation of institutional and cultural barriers, including for women entrepreneurs (McAdam, 2020) operating in the digital space.

Additionally, digital entrepreneurs were found to be in control of the way they portray themselves through the information they make available on the internet and the information about the entrepreneur and their enterprise. This effectively puts the process of shaping societal expectations, such as how to be taken seriously, in their own hands. Digital curating as a process is used by the participants to address structural barriers to legitimacy for themselves and their businesses. In this regard, we align with Duffy and Pruchniewska, (2017; p.848) who explain that self-promotion online happens through self-branding, ‘maintaining an updated website’, and sharing articles on Twitter and Facebook.

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Entrepreneurial stories are important to entrepreneurs to focus attention on opportunities with the highest potential in the context in which they are operating (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001) and storytelling is an integral aspect of building entrepreneurial legitimacy (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001; Wry et al., 2011; Pollack et al., 2012). Although similar to real-world storytelling, in a number of ways, digital footprints are written stories or images crafted by the entrepreneurs for the digital context, and effectively shield them from external pressures of being judged by carefully curating their representation, instead of being forced to conceal aspects of them (Stead, 2017). Additionally, as part of legitimacy building, such digital narrative representation was also used to create an image of 'having a robust online presence' as a 'symbol of their professional status' (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; p.848). This meant, effectively, that the entrepreneurs of our study were able to influence the way their enterprises were to be perceived (such as creating the illusion of an established company with big office space), and therefore contribute to a sense of self-promotion.

Finally, the entrepreneurs of our study used digital technologies to engage with networks in a way that enables the navigation of barriers to building legitimacy. McAdam et al., (2019) found that digital technologies enable networking for female digital entrepreneurs and transcending barriers such as segregation. In alignment with these insights, we found that digital networking enabled the entrepreneurs to navigate barriers such as bureaucracy, obsequiousness and get past gatekeepers. The findings further support extant research such as McAdam et al., (2018) and Castelló et al., (2016) in that entrepreneurs use digital networking to navigate social constraints to build legitimacy. The findings also support the Pergelova et al., (2019) research which found that digital technologies democratise network access for female digital entrepreneurs. Our findings, in addition, highlight digital networking in its capacity to build networks online, via modalities that include remote mentoring and information search.

Networks have been found to impact access to resources and growth (Carter et al., 2015; Schoonjans et al., 2013), which was also confirmed by the insights gained in our study. Digital technologies enable direct access to networks and information (Hair et al., 2012; Olsson and Bernhard, 2020), which can tell a story about access. In the context of our study, challenges to access was part of the reality of digital entrepreneurs: Nigeria has been described as a harsh or challenging environment to do business due to inadequate and poor infrastructures (Yaghoubi et al., 2012; Igwe et al., 2018), lack of access to resources or networks (Ituma and Simpson, 2009), and being constrained by gendered roles (Mordi et al., 2010). As the access to

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information can be a bureaucratic challenge in Nigeria (Yaghoubi et al., 2012), using information searches appeared as an approach to navigate this barrier. Thus, by conducting research and directly reaching out to stakeholders of interest, digital entrepreneurs avoid having to be obsequious to access information, which is a cultural bias within this context.

As Pollack et al. (2012) and Ngoasong (2018) argue, information is an important entrepreneurial resource needed for networking purposes so that entrepreneurs understand the competition and project themselves to a larger audience. In a context where this would otherwise not have been available due to structural issues to accessing information, digital resources access enabled them to achieve it. One of the most interesting findings of our study is the concept of the digital online context and the offline context as separate but interwoven. The digital and offline contexts are embedded (Daniels, 2021) and digital technologies enable entrepreneurs to engage in processes from which they once experienced exclusion in the offline context. Participants thus spoke of how searching for information helped them stay informed about regulations in order to make decisions that are important to the credibility and continuance of the business. Therefore, it constitutes not only a search but also an acquisition of knowledge and learning online from what others have done.

The last dimension of importance identified in our study is remote mentoring. Mentoring is entrepreneurial support (St-Jean and Audet, 2012) and in this study, entrepreneurial legitimacy was built by drawing on mentoring to alter the significance of constraints or barriers on the entrepreneurs, and even impact institutional change (McAdam et al., 2018). Although the literature argues that mentoring programs should be actively designed for female entrepreneurs (Foss et al., 2019) through our research, we observed that through digital technologies, the entrepreneurs actively sought out mentoring themselves to build legitimacy. Extant literature has shown that entrepreneurs receive resources such as advice, suggestions and help to build legitimacy (McGregor and Tweed, 2002), however, in our research, we found that beyond Duffy and Pruchniewska's (2017, p.852) suggestion that networking online requires 'interactive intimacy', the entrepreneurs highlighted the benefits from learning remotely following their networks' digital footprints to access resources; this aligns with St-Jean and Audet's (2012) argument that entrepreneurs learn from their network to build legitimacy. The remote mentorship dimension of digital networking is a story of accessing advice, decision making and drawing inspiration which serves as a mechanism for combating the structural issue

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of lack of information, especially through digital networking, which gives access to the mentors without mentors being synchronously online.

To conclude, digital entrepreneurs have to navigate context-specific barriers (Tilson et al., 2010; Kraus et al., 2018) stemming from the institutional and cultural contexts in which entrepreneurs operate (Welter, 2011). Digital entrepreneurship, far from being decontextualised, has been argued to foster the persistence of inequalities online for diverse demographics, such as female entrepreneurs (Dy et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the consideration of the digital as a further contextual dimension in this study reveals different entrepreneurial practices within it, which subsequently enable further opportunities to be seized (Davidson and Vaast, 2010; Berger et al., 2019).

The digital, therefore, is an additional layer of context in which entrepreneurs engage with different mechanisms of legitimation to overcome challenges and barriers provided by the other contextual dimensions of the institutional and the cultural. These barriers include normative pressures (Marlow and McAdam, 2018; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021), amongst others. Through the three mechanisms of digital shielding, digital curating and digital networking, excluded entrepreneurs, who are struggling to establish their profile as such- and consequently build legitimacy in these contexts, tell their entrepreneurial stories digitally in ways that are purposefully crafted to navigate the digital context (Micheli et al., 2022; McAdam et al., 2018); this enables entrepreneurs with reduced opportunities to access relevant networks (such as women and ethnic minority entrepreneurs). In essence, such entrepreneurs are able to find further opportunities to build legitimacy in the digital context (Kraus et al., 2018; Hair et al., 2012). This is a strong argument to account for the *digital as a context* (Berger et al., 2019) that is ‘not neutral’, but that is instead an important dimension of the contextualised experiences of entrepreneurs (Welter, 2011).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper addresses the theoretical gap in understanding how entrepreneurial actors gain legitimacy in a digital context by closely examining the mechanisms through which digital entrepreneurs build legitimacy in terms of operating, networking, and enacting opportunities. This study has also implications for practice and future research in contextualised view of

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digital entrepreneurship. In terms of theoretical implications, findings reveal additional dimensions of context, including the digital as part of an interpretivist framework which can help us understand digital entrepreneurship; this is in alignment with the view that entrepreneurial practices are contextualised (Welter, 2011).

By looking at the entrepreneurial practices of digital entrepreneurs in a complex, Western African context, we were able to identify and theorise three mechanisms through which entrepreneurs build legitimacy in new ways; the processes of digital shielding, curating digital footprints and networking providing personal and entrepreneurial strategies for them to gain presence, tackle endemic inequalities, and equip themselves with resources necessary to become resilient in their endeavours to gain legitimacy. Whilst focusing on these entrepreneurs and their digital legitimacy-building mechanisms, we were also able to contribute to theoretical developments on digital entrepreneurship (Dy et al. 2017; Sussan and Acs, 2017; Kraus et al., 2018; Lechner et al., 2022), and gain a nuanced understanding of ways in which the digital space is part of context, and how this presents an array of challenges as well as opportunities.

Thus, by revealing the three mechanisms of digital legitimacy building within context, we highlight the importance of considering how the digital enables entrepreneurs to overcome other contextual barriers and challenges to building legitimacy. The present research did not focus on gender analysis per se, despite the presence of women in the sample, but on the mechanisms of legitimacy building for all digital entrepreneurs. Recent literature indeed argue that entrepreneurship scholars should first focus on the context in which entrepreneurial activities take place (Baker and Welter, 2020) to account for the structures and contexts (Henry et al., 2016) in which digital entrepreneurship happens (Dy et al., 2017). We nevertheless see value for future research on this aspect; this would include focusing on gender for theorising. This would require an embedded understandings of how legitimacy is taking place, by considering the educational level and background of women digital entrepreneurs, as well as to examine how mechanisms highlighted in this paper, like digital shielding, can support the navigation of societal expectations that relate to digital female entrepreneurs' identity as women. That could include typical representations of co-existing roles within society, family and households, beyond their entrepreneurial endeavours (Dy et al., 2017; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021). Additionally, further research could build from our theorisation of legitimacy-building mechanisms in the digital to develop further theorising alongside the gender dimension.

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Furthermore, digital entrepreneurship has transformative potential for practice and society (Schiuma et al., 2021). There are indeed ways for policy-makers and institutional actors of the entrepreneurial ecosystems to remove barriers to starting up and growing as digital entrepreneurs as well as to develop supportive frameworks, particularly in more challenging non-Western contexts (World Bank, 2021). More concretely, in terms of implications for practice, digital technology is an enabler of new opportunities, as much as a shield from control and barriers, and potential perceptual and normative judgements that are interwoven with the operating context of entrepreneurs. Parallel to that, as this study shows, it can be a powerful tool to assert and legitimise a chosen identity either by curating online presence or by limiting face-to-face interactions- that choice can also have a strong symbolic value. The creation and sharing of entrepreneurial stories, together with engagement with networks, via which entrepreneurs can access support, resources and knowledge are significant for their legitimacy, but also for growth and scaling.

Amongst relevant practices that can be designed to help entrepreneurs build legitimacy, online mentoring seemed to be the most beneficial and relevant. In addition, the management of digital identities (e.g. websites and resources referring to one's own business via the creation of brand/persona) would benefit from implementing such modalities as part of acceleration programmes, particularly with a view to the mentoring and network-creation component. In terms of policy making, raising awareness of the issues and barriers related to building digital entrepreneurship and not solely focusing on the support for the accompanying technology, is important, and can be facilitated via dedicated initiatives and programmes that support the integration of such modes of enterprising towards creating a cohort of successful digital entrepreneurs/best practices as benchmarks and role models.

Gradually, with the enhanced presence of such practices, behavioural change would be effectuated and institutional barriers would be hopefully lowered. Societally, this could lead to further diversity and empowerment in terms of entrepreneurial activity, and the capturing of opportunities which are dynamic, in tandem with the evolving nature of digital technology advancements. This evolution could potentially provide further future pathways for non-established entrepreneurs, by highlighting new and different ways to identify and enact opportunities.

In methodological terms, this study builds on qualitative data collected among digital entrepreneurs at a given point in time. Further research could explore a longitudinal perspective

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to understand the long-term implications of digital shielding on entrepreneurial pursuits and the navigation of institutional complexities. The present study concludes that for digital entrepreneurs, the experience of building legitimacy is a way of coping with barriers. In other words, building legitimacy is a response to institutional complexities emanating from societal expectations. The entrepreneurs build legitimacy by drawing on coping mechanisms in four dimensions which could include digital, symbolic, relational and gendered- these foci could open avenues for new research, including comparative research between Western and non-western contexts. In addition, larger-scale quantitative research could be designed around the three mechanisms identified and theorised in this paper to complement the explorative analysis of the digital entrepreneurship phenomenon,

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