



## The Impact of Digital Media on Female Entrepreneurship

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I have adhered to the Trinity Washington University policy regarding academic honesty in completing this assignment.

Submitted to Dr. Donatus A. Uzomah on behalf of the faculty of the School of Professional Studies in partial fulfillment of the degree requirements for the Masters of Arts in Communication.

Spring 2014

### **Abstract**

In spite of the number of female entrepreneurs and women-owned businesses rising in recent years, female entrepreneurship remains a largely understudied phenomenon. Past and existing research of entrepreneurship have also been overwhelmingly studied from a male perspective, in spite of significantly different motivational, financial and emotional factors for women pursuing entrepreneurship compared to men in the existing literature. This research study surveyed 55 participants utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the impact of digital media on the process of female entrepreneurship. The Social Identity Theory (SIT), Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and Gender Communication Theory (GCT) are applied to identify correlations between new digital media tools, social platforms and communication traits with regards to how women start and operate their businesses in the evolving digital landscape.

*Keywords: economy, women, female entrepreneur, entrepreneurship, women business owners, women-owned businesses, digital media, social media, digital communication, gender communication theory, social identity theory, uses and gratification theory*

### **Acknowledgements**

I would first and foremost like to acknowledge each and every woman business owner, female entrepreneur, colleague, personal and professional contact who contributed their time, feedback and help with gathering data for my study. Without each of their valuable insight and willingness to share their experiences, networks and resources, my research would not have been possible. I would also like to thank the staff and my fellow graduate classmates at Trinity Washington University for their advice and thoughts throughout my work on this thesis, especially Dr. Donatus A. Uzomah for his guidance as my faculty advisor. Thank you to family and friends for their support and understanding. Lastly, an enormous and grateful thank you to my lifelong partner and husband, Anthony Yan, for offering his unfaltering and constant patience, love and support throughout the past few years, without which I could not have completed my graduate degree on my own.

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## **Introduction**

Digital media is an ever-evolving phenomenon, combining an increasingly complex variety of modern communication technologies, such as email and texting, along with newer social media tools and online platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. While digital and social media were initially used for individual and personal reasons, such as keeping in touch or sharing photos with family and friends, professional organizations and business corporations of all types and sizes around the world soon caught on to the immense potential of connecting with – and marketing and advertising to – a wider, more global audience and consumers at little to virtually no cost through online means and mobile devices. The ease and inexpensiveness of joining social media networks or signing up for various digital media accounts, as well as the availability and accessibility to a wide variety of resources and support networks online, have all been hypothesized to be important, contributing factors in encouraging and empowering more women to pursue their own businesses and become their own bosses in recent years, frequently with little to no risk or costs at all.

In fact, Forbes Magazine declared 2013 the “Year of the Woman Entrepreneur”, with 2014 continuing to be a “Break Out Year” for women entrepreneurship (Casserly, 2013; Stengel, 2014). As the needs and wants of women evolve and outgrow the current corporate landscape of traditional “9-to-5”, 40-hour a week jobs and careers, more women are now eschewing becoming someone else’s employees and creating opportunities to be their own employer through entrepreneurship – and yet, the existing literature on female entrepreneurship, specifically, remains young, limited and scarce, with studies typically generating overwhelmingly male-centric results and perspectives. As such, researchers and experts insist there is an urgent need for more in-depth future research and data on female entrepreneurship (Hughes et al., 2012).

This research study will analyze the impact of digital media on the process of female entrepreneurship using the following perspectives: Social Identity Theory (SIT), Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and Gender Communication Theory (GCT). These theoretical frameworks will be applied to identify emerging themes in motivations leading women to pursue entrepreneurship. This study will also analyze which specific digital media tools and social platforms women are using to start and sustain their businesses, as well as specific communication traits female entrepreneurs are using to operate their businesses, with the goal of identifying any existing, significant correlational relationship between both variables and how they relate to the process of female entrepreneurship.

### **Statement of Problem**

According to data gathered from the 2013 State of Women-Owned Businesses Survey, a joint effort conducted by the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO) and Web.com, not only are current women entrepreneurs optimistic about their businesses' performances for the year, but the number of women starting their own businesses are also predicted to be significantly higher than past years (NAWBO & Web.com, 2013).

And yet, in spite of the rising numbers of women entrepreneurs and women business owners, the existing academic research on female entrepreneurship, specifically, remains very young. Past and current studies on entrepreneurship also have yet to agree on a universal definition of what the term "entrepreneurship" means, exactly – not to mention, many researchers in the past have largely disregarded the seemingly vastly different experiences of women business owners as they relate to the entrepreneurial process, overall, choosing to focus on entrepreneurship from an overwhelmingly male, patriarchal perspective in the existing research literature (Cole, 1969; Hughes et al., 2012).

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this research study will be to explore the impact of digital media on the process of entrepreneurship from a female-focused perspective through the lens of Social Identity Theory (SIT), Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and Gender Communication Theory (GCT). More specifically, these conceptual frameworks will be applied to understand the motivations for women to pursue entrepreneurship, and to determine which digital media tools, social platforms and communication traits women are utilizing the most when starting and sustaining their own businesses through the process of female entrepreneurship. Both qualitative and quantitative methods will be used in order to identify both practical data and abstract themes emerging from the study's results for future research.

**Need for Study**

Digital media is becoming increasingly complex in nature, becoming an essential part of social lives and individual identities, from users “following” celebrities on Twitter, to consumers “liking” their favorite brands on Facebook. While most people use digital and social media for personal reasons, many have harnessed the power of digital media to turn passion project, hobbies and interests into highly profitable business ventures, such as the new generation of bloggers landing lucrative deals with major brand names from clothing to accessory companies, and even traveling perks.

More women, especially, have embraced the business opportunities that digital media has opened up for them, such as Michelle Phan, an art-student-turned-multimillionaire through her self-generated make-up video tutorials on YouTube. Interest in the economic impact of women entrepreneurship and women-owned businesses, specifically – an impact of \$2.86 trillion dollars in total – has surged dramatically in recent decades, deserving more academic inquiry and study

as the number of women business owners continues to grow (Walmart, National Women's Business Council & Center for Women's Research in Business, 2009).

This study will explore the impact of digital media on female entrepreneurship through the application of the Social Identity Theory (SIT), Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and Gender Communication Theory (GCT). More specifically, the researcher will identify the motivations for women to pursue female entrepreneurship, while also identifying the digital media tools, social platforms and communication traits women frequently use to start and sustain their businesses. Due to the lack of female-centric approaches to entrepreneurship in the existing research and literature, this study might provide direct insight into the motivations of women entrepreneurs through the use of Social Identity Theory without comparing them to men entrepreneurs. By applying the Uses and Gratification Theory along with Gender Communication Theory to this research study, the findings might be used to help future scholars or aspiring women entrepreneurs to identify how women's communication traits and digital media are correlated as the future of digital and social media constantly evolve.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms, as defined by the researcher, will be used for the purposes and scope of this research study:

1. **Digital Media:** Any forms of media that can be created, edited, shared, consumed and accessed through various technologies such as a computer, laptop or mobile device.
2. **Social Platforms:** Any websites allowing users to interact and connect with each other, frequently leading to building niche online communities and online friendships.
3. **Communication Traits:** Behaviors related to the manner in which an individual exchanges meaning and messages with others.



4. **Entrepreneurship:** The process of creating new business ventures through individual motivations, resources, responsibility and assumption of risks and rewards.
5. **Woman/Female Entrepreneur:** A woman/female who self-identifies as a participant in the process of entrepreneurship.
6. **Social Identity Theory (SIT):** The theory in which individuals search for in-groups who share common interests, beliefs and values while rejecting out-groups who do not display similar values, morals or perspectives for the purposes of increasing feelings of positive social identity and self-worth.
7. **Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT):** The theory in which individuals select specific digital media and social platforms for the purposes of self-fulfillment and self-gratification.
8. **Gender Communication Theory (GCT):** The theory in which men display more assertive, proactive communication traits and behaviors, whereas women display more passive, reactive communication traits and behaviors.

### **Literature Review**

While the idea of working for one's self dates back much longer than the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with researchers such as Cole (1969) trying to unsuccessfully define the word "entrepreneur" for decades, more in-depth academic literature on entrepreneurship did not surface until the late 1970s and 1980s. American professor and author William Gartner (1988), a leading authority on entrepreneurship in the United States, has written extensively on the topic of emerging businesses and organizations in America over the past 30 years, quickly emerging as an early pioneer in the industry. One of Gartner's earlier texts, a meta-analytical review of the existing definitions and characteristics of the term "entrepreneur" across various studies, remains one of the earliest influential pieces of literature on entrepreneurship, comparing two early perspectives of the entrepreneurial process: a trait-based approach versus a behavioral-based perspective (Gartner, 1988).

In essence, Gartner was the first person to reframe the question regarding "who" an entrepreneur is, by asking "what" an entrepreneur does, instead. Denoting the absence of a standard, generic definition of the term "entrepreneur", at the time, Gartner (1988) made a case for future researchers to define entrepreneurs with regards to their behaviors, as the word "entrepreneurship", according to Gartner, is the ongoing, complex process of creating an organization. Gartner (1988) maintained that while many entrepreneurs may share the same personality and character traits, a non-entrepreneur possessing the same set of entrepreneurial qualities may not necessarily decide to become an entrepreneur themselves.

As such, Gartner (1988) contended that an entrepreneur – and, by extension, the concept of entrepreneurship itself – should be studied through the lens of how entrepreneurs behave and act, versus trying to profile business owners and assigning them subjective character traits.

Consequently, Gartner (1988) stressed that entrepreneurship can only occur once an organization or process is created, contending that a behavioral-based approach rather than a trait-based one is crucial for the direction of future research and study of entrepreneurship.

Following Gartner's footsteps, Hebert & Link (1989), took a similar approach by reviewing and synthesizing current research on the term entrepreneur and the process of entrepreneurship itself. Compared to Gartner (1988), however, they did not argue for the exclusive definition of entrepreneur and entrepreneurship by strictly taking a behavioral approach, but instead, combined both an entrepreneur's actions (*i.e.*, behavioral traits) and abilities (*i.e.*, personality traits) and how these items would affect the success (or failure) of the organization or business entities that the entrepreneur has created (Hebert & Link, 1989).

While formal research on entrepreneurship began in the United States, entrepreneurship itself is not a strictly American phenomenon, much less an occurrence and process restricted to men, only. In 2006, Romanian economics expert and professors Welsh & Dragusin studied the emergence and growth traits of female entrepreneurs in the United States of America, hoping to replicate the process for women in the researchers' own country. Their work offered a different "outsider" perspective of American female entrepreneurship, and marked a historical basis of women entrepreneurship emerging strongly not only in America, but also as an emerging global experience and phenomenon. Welsh & Dragusin (2006) argued that women business owners are important contributors to a country's economy and its process of wealth creation, yet they wondered why the impact of these female-owned businesses and their revenues remained a widely understudied and under-researched phenomenon.

Interestingly, Welsh & Dragusin (2006) pointed out that women are now expanding into "non-traditional" industries such as construction, agriculture or transportation. The underlying

suggestion is subtle, but the researchers were implying that these are non-traditional industries specifically to women, and not necessarily men, where these industries are in turn considered traditionally male. But the differences between female and male entrepreneurs were not isolated to industry choice: while many characteristics were generally similar, the researchers found distinct differences in motivations, experiences, and organizational sizes of the businesses that were women-owned compared to men-owned businesses (Welsh & Dragusin, 2006).

The researchers also found that women were typically older when starting their businesses compared to men, and they were often motivated by the need for independence and achievement from current work frustrations and challenges. In contrast, men were more singularly motivated by the desire to control or create something for the sake of creating it. In this sense, Welsh & Dragusin (2006) inferred that women become business owners out of need in a reactive manner, whereas men become business owners out of want in a more proactive manner, an observation that could be compared and linked in a parallel manner in the traditional view of gender communication and gender differences between males and females being more aggressive and more passive, respectively.

While both women and men business entrepreneurs shared many traits typical of entrepreneurship, such as innovation, persistence and passion, Welsh & Dragusin (2006) found that women were generally less confident and aggressive than men, with “inferior” leadership and problem-solving abilities when making decisions under high pressure or risk. Perhaps one of the biggest problems with their findings is the use of the word “inferior” when comparing women to men, as it begs the question: why does comparing female to male entrepreneurs make men the “default” comparison level that women should be pitted against?

In fact, compared to their male counterparts, women entrepreneurs tended to be more ethical, flexible, and tolerant in their entrepreneurial endeavors, yet nowhere did Welsh & Dragusin (2006) employ the term “superior” when comparing female and male entrepreneurs in their research study and findings. While not explicitly, the researchers’ use of vocabulary denote that within the same decade dating back to 2006, female entrepreneurs are not deemed equal to male entrepreneurs, a trend that is reflected not only in entrepreneurship but also in the corporate world. Welsh & Dragusin (2006) provided an important comparative starting point for later studies, such as Parker’s (2010) study on the problem of studying female entrepreneurship, specifically.

A professor at Western Michigan University, Parker (2010) provided a more in-depth examination of female entrepreneurship by analyzing existing literature regarding this topic dating back to the late 1970s and 1980s. Parker (2010)’s research highlighted the complexity and problematic nature of studying female entrepreneurship, as the process itself can span across a variety of fields, including economics and sociology, among many others. In fact, within female entrepreneurship itself, Parker (2010) found that there were many additional terms to which female entrepreneurs identified themselves with, including the “intentional entrepreneur”, “copreneur”, “spiral careerist” and “punctuated careerist”.

In efforts to simplify the process of studying female entrepreneurship as a whole, however, Parker (2010) offered a theoretical framework for future research that strived to synthesize related data across a number of disciplines to render more consistent and comprehensive results. These aspects included: i) profiling women entrepreneurs; ii) examining their motivations in pursuing entrepreneurship; iii) reviewing the types of businesses they are creating; and finally, iv) assessing women entrepreneurs’ access to capital. Parker (2010)

admitted that integrating multiple perspectives of female entrepreneurship into one, single theory might be nearly impossible to do, yet she insisted that existing literature on female entrepreneurship must become more practical versus analytical moving forward, in order to truly be helpful to academics and aspiring women entrepreneurs.

Perhaps taking a cue from Parker (2010), Thebaud's (2010) findings on women actively choosing entrepreneurship as a career choice reflected a deeper personal, yet practical approach. A sociology professor at Cornell University, Thebaud (2010) looked at entrepreneurship as a career choice by studying gender differences between male and female self-assessments of their own entrepreneurial abilities. Thebaud (2010) analyzed whether self-beliefs had an impact on the actual gender disparity in entrepreneurship. Similarly to earlier research findings such as those provided by Welsh & Dragusin (2006), Thebaud (2010) echoed earlier studies by pointing out that female entrepreneurship remains an understudied discipline. She highlighted the difficulty of adequately studying why men were more likely to pursue entrepreneurship more aggressively as compared to women, and her findings suggested that the disparity might likely be due to women's own self-perceptions and beliefs regarding their own personal abilities in pursuing entrepreneurship and becoming entrepreneurs (Thebaud, 2010).

Furthermore, Thebaud (2010) found that not only were women less likely to perceive themselves as being well-equipped and more able to become entrepreneurs versus men, they often held themselves to a higher standard of ability when compared to men in the same situation as well. This often meant that women had higher expectations than men of their own success and abilities, creating a detrimental effect when their businesses' results or revenues did not meet these expectations, thereby affecting women on a more significantly negative basis and reducing levels of emotional satisfaction (Thebaud, 2010).

These were critical findings, as together, they pose an implication of whether these self-beliefs are culturally-based or not – are women naturally inclined to believe they are less capable of pursuing entrepreneurship, or are these self-perceptions learned and internalized from external sources or factors over time? By that same basis, as Welsh & Dragusin (2006) pointed out in their earlier study, are women self-reporting lower abilities due to their choosing to start businesses in male-dominated industries, rather than more “traditionally” female ones? If so, perhaps the question for future research is the following: who (or what) is perpetuating these negative self-beliefs, and what can be done to help women entrepreneurs abolish these harmful and damaging self-perceptions before the beginning stages of the entrepreneurship process?

In addition to Thebaud (2010)’s findings on entrepreneurial gender differences, Carree & Verheul’s (2012) later research study found further differences in women entrepreneurship compared to men entrepreneurs based on satisfaction levels. Many start-ups and organizations experience failure 60% more often than success, generating less income than other similarly employed individuals, in the first five years alone of someone pursuing entrepreneurship on their own – keeping in mind that both are tangible constructs as the concepts of “failure” and “success” often mean different things to different people, regardless of gender (Carree & Verheul, 2012). Both experts in the areas of management, business and economics, Carree & Verheul (2012) measured satisfaction levels based on income, psychological burden and leisure time. Their findings related that women entrepreneurs were generally more happy with their incomes than men despite lower business revenues, yet were more emotionally dissatisfied due to their inability to cope with stress and lack of leisure time.

These findings are intriguing, considering that Welsh & Dragusin (2006) and Thebaud (2010) have iterated in their own studies that many female entrepreneurs generally pursue

entrepreneurship for reasons other than monetary ones when compared to men, such as wanting more work-family balance or due to job-related challenges in their traditional workplaces. Since this study compared women to male entrepreneurs, similar to the studies before, a future research question could compare female entrepreneurs' satisfaction levels based on other women non-entrepreneurs' happiness levels for more accurate results, as it has clearly denoted in past research that men and women entrepreneurs are not motivated by the same factors, nor do they operate and run their businesses in the same manner.

Although it is now becoming more apparent that the rate of female entrepreneurs and women business owners have rose quickly in the past few decades, Court (2012), a Fellow at the Institute for Social Innovation at Fielding Graduate University in California, pointed out that women-owned businesses' actual economic contributions in dollar amounts still remain quite unknown and largely understudied. Court (2012) also denoted that women-owned businesses are still being marginalized compared to male-owned businesses, receiving less funding to start – and sustain – their businesses. While Court's (2012) study did not generate meaningful data, nor did it offer solutions as to what women can do to approach these setbacks, the results stemming from her research methodology may have been largely due to several factors: only 10% of the 605 women entrepreneurs in her targeted population answered Court's survey, thereby drastically limiting any significant results or conclusions.

Court's (2012) assumption for the low participation rate is based on the inference that women were reluctant to share business revenues and financial details about their businesses themselves. This is an interesting note, as women entrepreneurs were also reported to be less open and confident about their business processes and revenues in earlier studies conducted by Thebaud (2010) and Welsh & Dragusin (2006), respectively. For future researchers, Court



(2012) thus suggested looking at data directly from the IRS in order to study actual financial contributions of women entrepreneurs to the economy at large.

In reviewing the previous literature, one pattern emerges as women are compared to men when starting up businesses: are women with male traits more likely to become female entrepreneurs than those who do not? Orser, Elliott & Leck (2011) studied how female entrepreneurs identified themselves within a feminist perspective of entrepreneurship, despite some female entrepreneurs being in male-dominated industries such as manufacturing or construction as compared to those in more “traditionally” female industries such as retail or service-oriented professions. Unlike most other researchers in previously reviewed studies, Orser, Elliott & Leck (2011) conducted content analyses to gather qualitative data in addition to reviewing the historical literature on female entrepreneurship. The researchers found that a large percentage of the women entrepreneurs surveyed were not traditionally “feminine”, in the sense that they did not ascribe themselves to be “nurturing” or “caring”, traits that have traditionally been ascribed to being “female” versus “male” (Orser, Elliott & Leck, 2011).

This provided a different perspective of Thebaud’s (2010) study on women’s self-perceptions regarding their ability to become an entrepreneur, as Orser, Elliott & Leck’s (2011) findings suggested that based on women’s self-reports, women tended to be more pro-active leaders and creative problem solvers. A potential question to raise for future research, therefore, is to explore whether these self-reports are actually based on women’s *realities* as entrepreneurs, or whether these responses are based on women entrepreneurs providing traits that they *would like* to have more of, considering the findings are contradictory from one study to another.

As previously addressed, while the rise of female entrepreneurship is not strictly relegated to being an American phenomenon, the United States currently leads with the most

favorable conditions towards developing female entrepreneurs when compared to 17 countries worldwide (The Global Entrepreneurship and Development Institute, 2013). Ilie (2012), an economics and business Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University professor and researcher in Bucharest, raised the attention that the rate women entrepreneurship has grown significantly on a global scale, as well. Like many researchers before her, Ilie (2012) took an empirical approach in her 2012 study of female entrepreneurship, summarizing women's motivations towards pursuing entrepreneurship and analyzing emerging, existing patterns.

Ilie (2012) pointed out that social, financial as well as emotional disparities between women and men entrepreneurs – all stated previously and addressed by other researchers based in the United States, including those reviewed in this study's literature review – are also found worldwide, thus implying that these differences found in other U.S. studies regarding female entrepreneurship are not isolated to America alone, and are universal to the experience of being female, specifically. Ilie (2012) provided three main “drivers” for female entrepreneurs in various economic societies, including factor-driven groups (Middle East and North Africa), efficiency-driven groups (Eastern Europe) and innovation-driven groups (Asia). Perhaps the fact that differences found in male versus female entrepreneurship are universal could provide a basis towards addressing and configuring a more global-oriented, comprehensive landscape of women entrepreneurs in general.

Along those lines, Hughes, a professor and researcher at the University of Alberta in Canada, along with her co-authors, also admitted that while the study of female entrepreneurship has grown tremendously in the past decades, their main criticism in reviewing the literature exposed the fact that entrepreneurship is still mainly studied from a “male” perspective and is not inclusive of females' experiences, in general (Hughes et al., 2012). The researchers underlined

the fact that studies on female entrepreneurship have been historically repetitive, therefore putting out a “Call for Papers” in 2010 for new perspectives and questions. In this call, they urged their fellow scholars and academics to ask new questions, reframe former questions in fresh, innovative perspectives under different new contexts as well as using new methodological approaches in relation to female entrepreneurship (Hughes et al., 2012). The researchers chose six studies that presented possible new territories for future exploration, including studying the ways in which female entrepreneurs may be consciously or subconsciously discriminated against versus male entrepreneurs, as well as examining how the work-family balance can motivate or even nurture female entrepreneurs, instead of hindering them. These are all topics that Hughes et al. (2012) considered to be interesting new directions for future research and study in the context of female entrepreneurship.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Social Identity Theory (SIT)**

The Social Identity Theory (SIT) was first coined in 1979, defined by researchers John C. Turner and Henri Tajfel through the application of social and psychological perspectives. SIT highlights cognitive and behavioral processes in relation to the formation of social in- and out-groups. The theory assumes that individuals favor “in-group” members who share common interests, beliefs and values with themselves, while rejecting those who do not display similar traits, perspectives and morals as “out-groups”, with the goal of increasing higher, more positive feelings of self-worth and social identity (Trepte, 2006). Trepte (2006) further listed social categorization, comparison, identity and self-esteem as main SIT principles. While the definition of self-esteem can vary from individual to individual, these principles assume that people compare and categorize different social groups in order to assess and establish their own individual sense of social identity. Furthermore, individuals frequently attach significantly high emotional value to their membership in a specific social group (Trepte, 2006).

In the manner that gender disparities still exist in today’s traditional corporate world, gender disparities also still exist in the world of entrepreneurship. With relation to the process of female entrepreneurship, a study conducted by Welsh & Dragusin (2006) found that women often cited identifying with the idea of becoming their own bosses and becoming business entrepreneurs out of need in a reactive, passive manner in this field as well, whereas men who went into businesses for themselves were mainly driven and motivated by desires to be independent, to achieve, and to be “in control”. And while women often denoted wanting greater work-life balance or to escape from job-related challenges in the traditional workplace environment as motivations to pursue entrepreneurship, Carree & Verheul (2012) found that

women entrepreneurs were generally more emotionally dissatisfied than male entrepreneurs, due to their inability to cope with stress or lack of leisure time.

SIT will be applied in this study since it may help support how some women are no longer identifying with more traditional corporate structures in the workplace, as their motivations and priorities may differ from their employer's and motivate them to identify with the process of female entrepreneurship instead. This research study will explore why women self-identify as female entrepreneurs, and potentially identify how women may be starting and sustaining their own new business ventures separate from a traditional employer to increase their sense of social identity and self-worth.

### **Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT)**

Katz, Blumler & Guerevitch (1974) developed the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) assuming that individuals actively choose and decide which forms of media and content to use and consume based on the fulfillment of their own needs and wants (as cited in Dainton & Zelle, 2011). Applying UGT, Raacke & Bonds-Raacke (2008) also found that social networking websites – and by extension, digital media, in general – encourage and enable the formation as well as the reinforcement of relationships. In addition to initiating and strengthening relationships, McQuail (1987) stated that individuals further seek specific media for entertainment, to find resources and information as well as to validate or form their own social identities (as cited in Dainton & Zelle, 2011).

Through UGT, this study will explore how women choose to pursue entrepreneurship through the use of specific digital media tools and social platforms in order to further evolve and grow their identities as female entrepreneurs. Kamberidou (2013), a faculty member at the University of Athens in Greece, found in her study that women's natural communication traits

do, in fact, position them to do well as women entrepreneurs in the digital age, since social media and other digital communication tools today heavily rely on more “female” communication strengths such as “listening” and “building relationships” to build creative and collaborative online communities or Internet-based businesses. Kamberidou (2013) found that similarly in real life, where women tend to naturally draw others into the conversation more easily than men, so does this natural tendency to be nurturing and accommodating also transfers over while using technology. Applying the UGT framework in this study might help academics as well as future aspiring female entrepreneurs to understand which digital media tools and social platforms helps women develop their own identities and memberships into the world of female entrepreneurship.

### **Gender Communication Theory (GCT)**

Gender Communication Theory (GCT) assumes that men and women inherently communicate differently, with men displaying more assertive, aggressive communication behaviors as compared to women’s more passive, reactive tendencies. Deborah Tannen’s early books on this subject – *You Just Don’t Understand* (1990) and *Talking from 9 to 5* (1994) – first introduced the notions of “rapport-talk” versus “report-talk” to the field of communications (Barrett & Davidson, 2006). Building – and perhaps perpetuating – on existing cultural gender stereotypes, Tannen maintained that women’s conversations are more oriented towards establishing and cultivating positive, pleasant rapport with others in order to strengthen connections and community, whereas men’s communications were more assertive and primarily focused on report patterns, directed towards achieving typically higher or more wealth-oriented status and results (Barret & Davidson, 2006).

This is not solely a gender communication phenomenon strictly isolated to our personal or social lives, Tannen contended, but these gendered communication patterns also transfer into

the workplace, creating unequal opportunities for advancement, such as women failing to negotiate or ask for a higher salary as compared to their male counterparts right from the beginning (Barrett & Davidson, 2006). This tendency towards socialized, feminized patterns of communication to be more reactive and passive versus proactive and assertive (*e.g.*, failing to ask for a promotion or a raise, or failing to network and self-promote), becomes especially noticeable as women climb the corporate ladder towards the highest echelons of upper and/or executive management, where female CEOs only make up 4.2% of the CEO positions at 500 Fortune companies and organizations today (Catalyst.org, 2013).

Workplace communication challenges have been cited as motivations for women to leave the traditional work environment to start their own businesses instead (Parker, 2012). While many other factors undoubtedly come into play regarding the gender disparity (*e.g.*, work-life balance, paid maternity leave, shifting priorities), the expectation that women need to communicate in a more transactional, “report-talk”-focused manner like men in order to be not only be successful, but to also be accepted in the corporate world, is still a widespread belief (Barrett & Davidson, 2006).

This study will aim to explore which communication traits female entrepreneurs are using to start and sustain their businesses, and whether their choices in digital media tools and social platforms reflect more feminized communication patterns that have been traditionally associated with the female social identity. Using GCT as a framework, this study’s results might explain why an increasing number of women are choosing to conduct their businesses online through digital media due to the inherently collaborative, “rapport”-building nature of the digital space and social platforms versus the traditionally more aggressive, “report”-oriented communication behaviors frequently expected in the physical corporate workplace.

## **Hypotheses and Research Questions**

This study will focus on the impact of digital media on female entrepreneurship. Considering the infancy of female entrepreneurship as a field of study in the social sciences, the potential for more in-depth research on this topic is enormous. Parker (2010) highlighted this process to be complex, even problematic as the topic itself spans a variety of fields, and offered a theoretical framework for future research, including profiling women to ascertain their motivations in pursuing entrepreneurship, reviewing the types of businesses they chose to create, and finally, assessing their access to financial, emotional and entrepreneurial development support.

It is hypothesized that women are motivated to leave traditional workplaces in order to actively pursue entrepreneurship to fulfill their own needs and form their own social identities as female entrepreneurs. Based on previous research, and by applying the frameworks of UGT and GCT, it is also hypothesized that women actively choose which digital media tools and social platforms to use throughout the process of female entrepreneurship that will enable and encourage them to use their natural, more feminized communication traits.

In consideration of the literature review and aforementioned hypotheses, the researcher will answer the following questions based on this study's results:

**RQ1:** What do women gain through female entrepreneurship?

**RQ2:** How does digital media impact female entrepreneurship?

**RQ3:** Is there a correlation between digital media and traditionally feminine communication traits?



### **Research Methodology**

To ensure rich, substantive data, this research included mixed qualitative and quantitative methods through the anonymous surveying of qualified participants. Based on Court (2012)'s findings that women were reluctant to share financial details about their businesses, the researcher was therefore not concerned with business revenue or profits in this study. Instead, the research methodology was designed to focus on what the motivations are for women to pursue female entrepreneurship, and study which specific forms of digital media, social platforms and communication traits female entrepreneurs are frequently using when starting and sustaining their businesses.

As past studies on female entrepreneurship often compared women against men, with the existing literature denoting an overwhelmingly male-centric perspective, the researcher chose to recruit only women participants for this study. For ethical reasons, participants were at least 18 years of age. All identified themselves as female entrepreneurs, whether they were pursuing entrepreneurship on a full-time or part-time basis. All consented to taking the 10-question survey questionnaire and were informed they could stop or skip any questions at any time. The researcher distributed the survey to personal and professional networks online via email as well as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

For reliability and validity purposes, the 10-question survey needed a sample size of at least 50 participants, which was achieved with a grand total of 55 participants in a period of one week. To encourage candidness with their responses, participants answered the survey anonymously. While the researcher provided options for the quantitative-based survey questions, the qualitative, open-ended question portions of the survey allowed for robust, open storytelling in each woman entrepreneur's motivations to start their businesses. Upon completion of the data-

gathering phase, the researcher performed statistical calculations as well as content analyses of the participant responses. As this study was not externally funded nor sponsored, none of the participants were compensated in any way for their time and participation. For a copy of the survey questions, see *Appendix A*.

## **Results and Findings**

### *Types of Businesses and Industries*

47.17% of the 55 women surveyed described themselves as full-time entrepreneurs, with their businesses as their primary incomes. 28.30% of the women surveyed responded that they were full-time employees, with a part-time business on the side. 9.43% of the sample surveyed declared that they were not currently employed and working on starting or growing their businesses. Full-time freelancers (*i.e.*, those relying on freelance projects to provide several incomes) and part-time employees with a part-time business on the side both equally made up 7.55% of the sample surveyed. See *Table 1*.

Among the 55 women entrepreneurs surveyed in this sample, 30.23% started businesses in Fashion, Beauty, and Retail, 23.26% started businesses in Communications, Marketing and Public Relations, and 13.95% started businesses in Technology. No women entrepreneur surveyed in this sample categorized their businesses to be in Construction and Real Estate (0%) and Engineering (0%). 2.38% of women entrepreneurs surveyed in this study listed their businesses to be in Accounting, Banking and Finance, while 4.76% started businesses in Law. The percentages obtained in this sample for these industries reflect the current historical trends that these are traditionally male-dominated. In this sample, however, Administrative Services-related businesses, an industry historically populated by women, only made up 2.38% of the sample size. See *Table 2*.

Table 1.

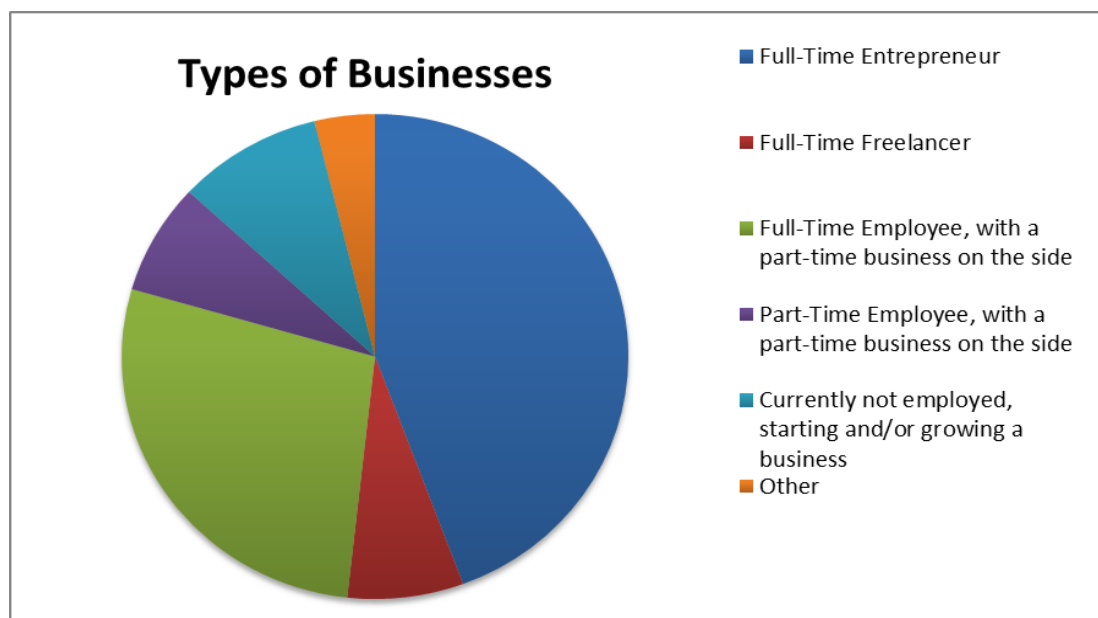
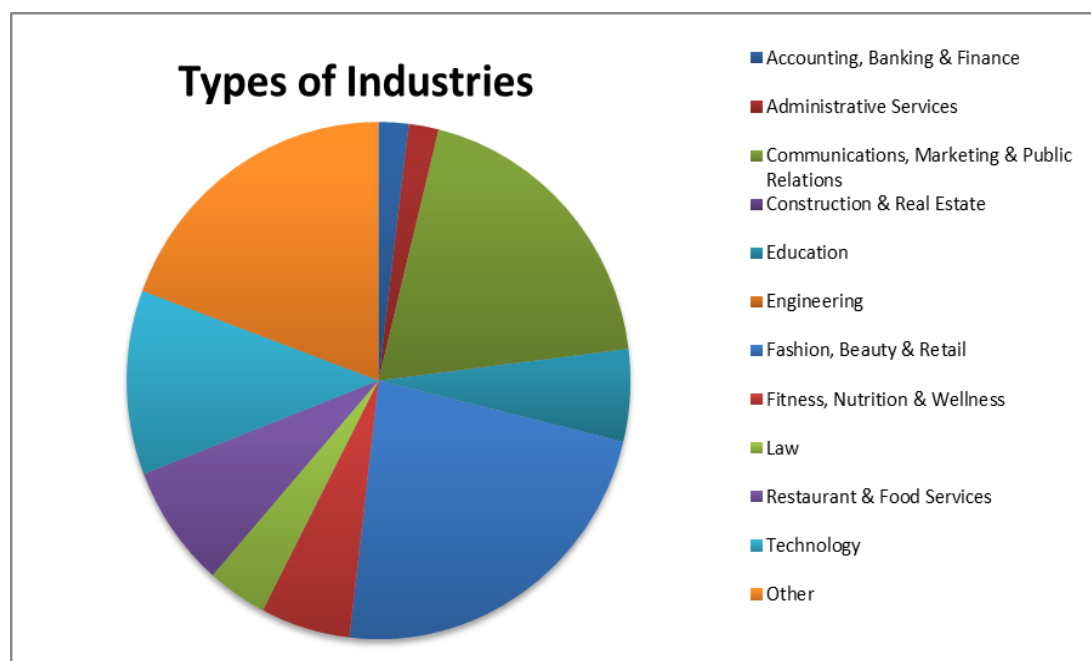


Table 2.



### *Motivations for Pursuing Entrepreneurship*

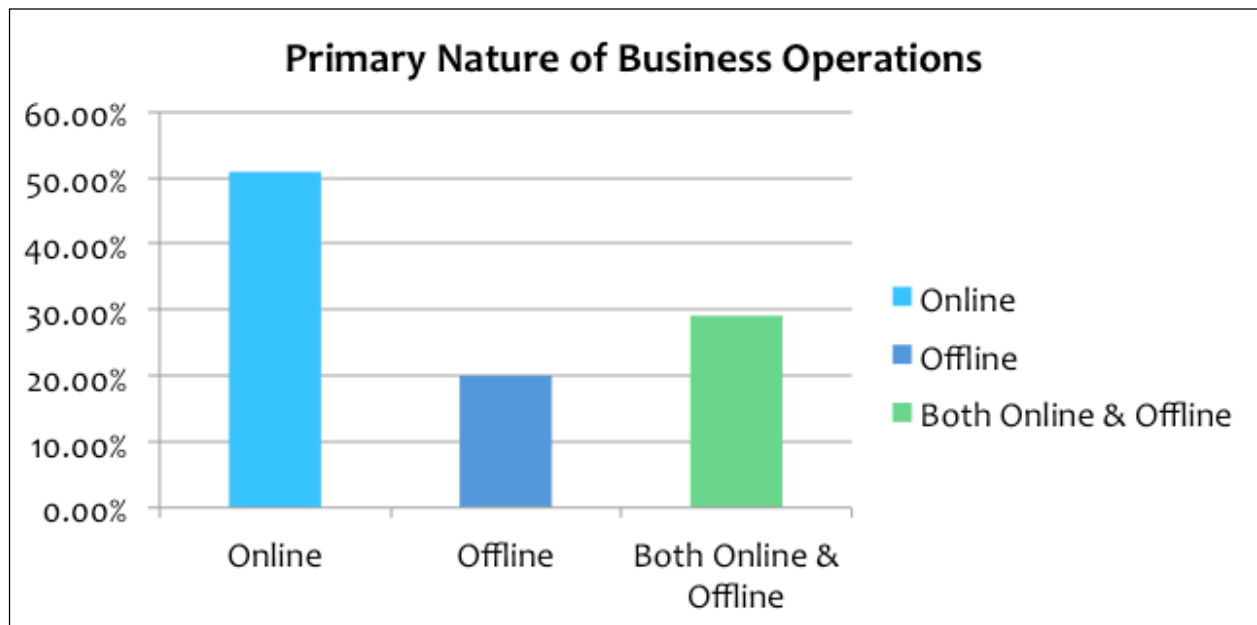
The most frequently used words and phrases the survey participants used in the qualitative, open-ended question portion of this study lead to the emergence of several themes,

including many women citing “freedom” and “flexibility” as primary motivators for their decision to pursue entrepreneurship, with relation to increasing their control over their “time”, schedules, work “hours” as well as “life”. The terms of “passion” and “love” used in the context of starting a venture as a personal hobby or project that later evolved into a lucrative full- or part-time entrepreneurial business venture were also prevalent. Concepts such as “creative”, “make” and “design” also surfaced more frequently in the analysis of participant responses than mentions of higher income or salary. The term “wanted” to describe the primary motivating emotion towards the pursuit of female entrepreneurship was also used more frequently than “need”.

#### *Primary Nature of Business Operations and Location of Resources*

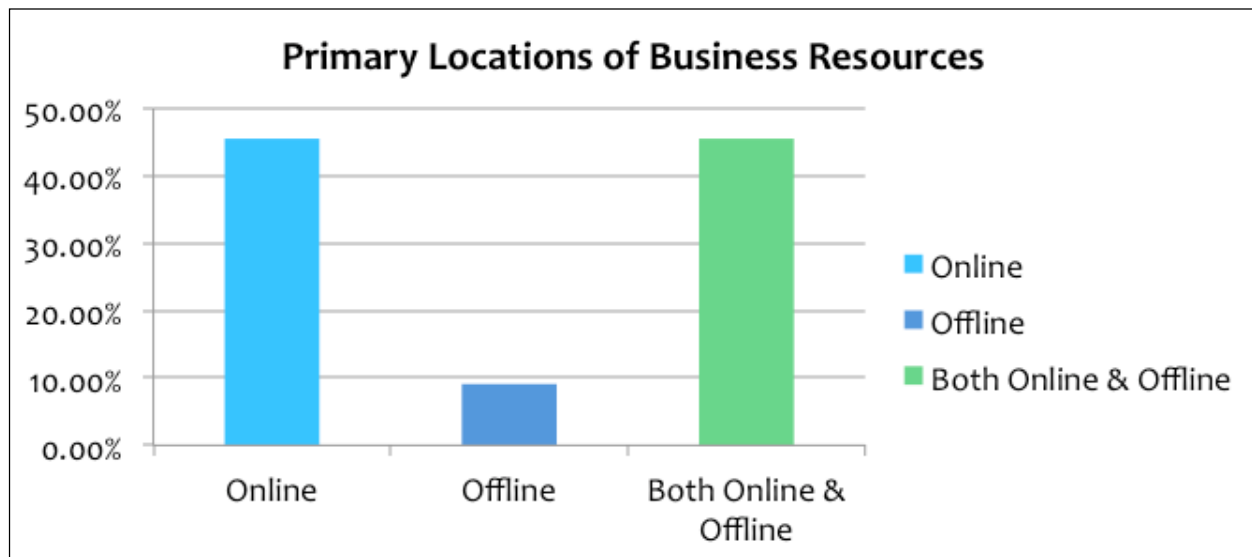
50.91% of female entrepreneurs surveyed in this research study noted that they primarily conduct their businesses online (*i.e.*, more than 75%, as defined within the context of this study, specifically), via the Internet and digital media. 29.09% of participants noted that they conduct their businesses both online and offline in equal amounts, whereas 20% of those surveyed selected conducting their businesses primarily offline (*i.e.*, more than 75%, as defined within the context of this study, specifically), such as via in-person meetings, with a physical office or retail space. *See Table 3.*

Table 3.



45.45% of the 55 survey participants noted that they found the necessary financial, legal and/or educational resources in order to start and grow their businesses primarily online (*i.e.*, more than 75%, as defined within the context of this study), via means such as the Internet, websites, forums and digital media. 45.45% listed both online and offline in equal amounts, whereas only 9.09% noted that they primarily found resources offline (*i.e.*, more than 75%, as defined within the context of this study), via sources such as in-person networking events, meetings, trainings or workshops. See Table 4.

Table 4.



#### *Digital Media and Communications Traits*

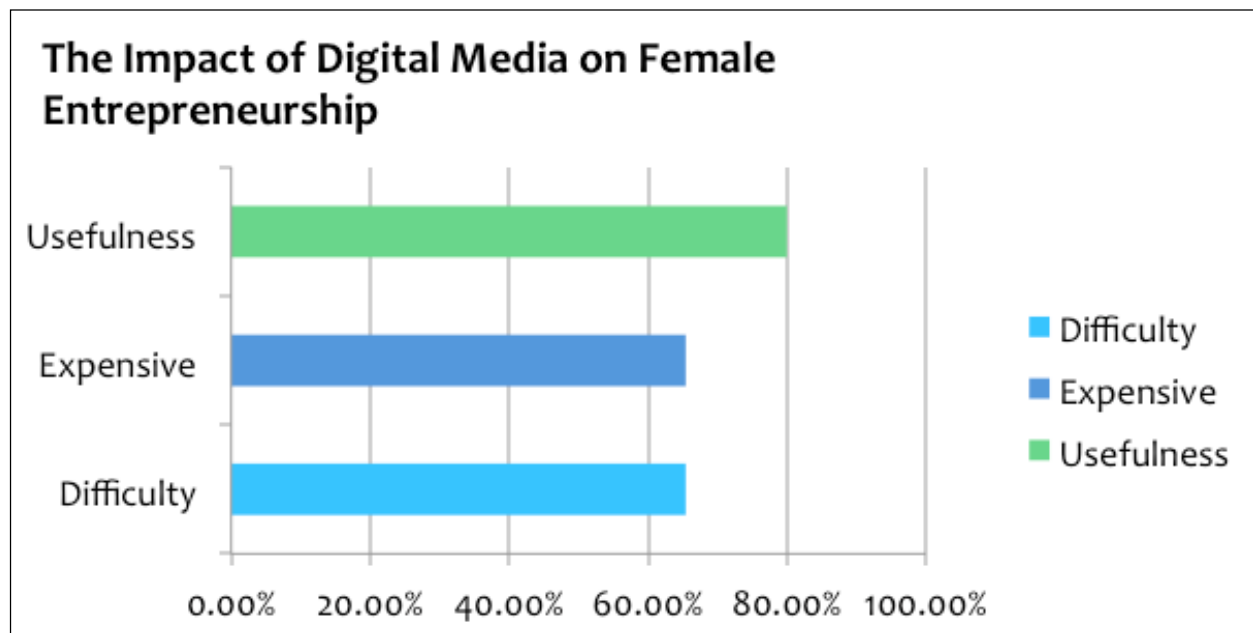
When asked to list the top three most important digital media and other related digital communications, networks, or platforms when operating their businesses, 72.73% of female entrepreneurs surveyed listed Facebook, 52.73% listed Twitter, and 47.27% listed email in response to the open-ended survey question. Instagram generated 30.91% of the answers gathered, and 18.18% of women entrepreneurs considered their business websites or blogs as one of the three most important digital media tools they use to operate their businesses.

In the same open-ended manner, an equal 61.82% of women listed both writing as well as listening when asked to provide the top three communication traits they believed they used the most when operating their businesses. Selling and marketing generated 40% of responses, while speaking came up in 34.55% of the participants' responses. Empathizing, and other participant responses such as "understanding", "caring" and "relating to the customer" coded under the same category, made up 16.36% of survey responses.

### *The Impact of Digital Media on Female Entrepreneurship*

Finally, the majority of female entrepreneurs surveyed in this research study's sample, *i.e.*, 65.45% of the 55 participants, reported that it would be “Very Difficult” and “Very Expensive” to start, grow and/or operate their businesses without the use of digital media and digital communication tools. On a scale of 1 to 5, the average rating regarding the level of expensiveness and difficulty of starting and sustaining the process of female entrepreneurship without any digital media tools or platforms was 4.40 and 4.42, respectively, a significant finding. 80% of women surveyed in this research noted that digital media and digital communication tools are “Very Useful” to their businesses, with a significantly average rating of 4.65 on a scale of 1 to 5 for all participants surveyed. See *Table 5*.

*Table 5.*



### **Discussion**

Due to the topic of female entrepreneurship remaining understudied, with most of the existing data and literature involving overwhelmingly male-centric point of views, this study

explored the impact of digital media on female entrepreneurship through the use of SIT, UGT and GCT frameworks from a strictly female perspective. These theories were appropriate for this study, with SIT guiding the researcher's focus on women's motivations in pursuing entrepreneurship and self-identifications as female entrepreneurs, while the application of both UGT and GCT perspectives enabled the researcher to study any existing, significant correlations between female entrepreneurs' choice of digital media and social platforms, as well as their communication traits and patterns in the process of starting and sustaining their businesses.

The study's results and findings were gathered through a survey questionnaire containing mixed qualitative- and quantitative-based questions. Content analysis and statistical calculations were performed in order to identify meaningful first-person assessments regarding why women identify themselves as female entrepreneurs, as well as derive the relationship between digital media and female entrepreneurs' behavioral communication patterns.

Based on the literature review, and by applying SIT, the researcher hypothesized that more women are becoming female entrepreneurs because entrepreneurship allows them to fulfill their own needs and interests that may not align with the traditional corporate structures in today's workplace. Through the lens of UGT and GCT, it was also hypothesized that women actively choose and use specific digital media tools and social platforms to start and sustain their businesses due to the inherently more "feminized" environments of online-based websites and networks, where women's natural community-oriented communication traits such as relationship-building could be gateways for women to pursue female entrepreneurship more easily and positively.

The researcher used the following three research questions derived from the hypotheses to guide the research study:



**RQ1:** What do women gain through female entrepreneurship?

**RQ2:** Does digital media have an impact on female entrepreneurship?

**RQ3:** Is there a correlation between digital media and communication traits in female entrepreneurship?

While the results derived from this study support the historical trends cited in past studies such as Parker (2010), assuming that women tend to start businesses in more traditionally “feminine” businesses, this study’s findings were not statistically significant. The survey participants categorized their businesses in the following three leading industries in this study: Fashion, Beauty and Retail (30.23%); Communications, Marketing and Public Relations (23.26%); and Technology (13.95%) – yet while the first two industries have traditionally been women-oriented, the survey results denoting that more women are starting businesses in the technology industry poses a shifting, interesting trend. The proliferation of new technologies is constantly in motion, and as digital media evolves, this is an exciting new industry for women to explore entrepreneurship opportunities in an area that has historically been dominated by men.

When analyzing participant responses regarding why they started their own businesses, the prevalent themes emerging from the text and content were largely abstract or emotional in nature. Most participants surveyed in this study listed reasons that were strongly associated with psychological or mental traits, such as personal fulfillment, finding more happiness, or seeking more opportunities to be creative. Participants rarely listed salary-based or financial-related motivations, although the potential to earn more money through entrepreneurship was a reason listed by three different participants in this sample. These results support previous findings from past studies conducted by researchers such as Thebaud (2010) and Carree & Verheul (2012) as previously stated in the literature review.

Although it is important to note that a few participants in this study became female entrepreneurs reactively, such as one participant answering she became a female entrepreneur through inheriting the family business, participants most commonly listed actively “want[ing]” to pursue entrepreneurship due to their own personal “passion”, hobbies and interests, and many responded that they were motivated and driven by abstract emotions of “like” or “love”.

Almost half of the participants in this study identified as full-time entrepreneurs. With the exception of two participants who explained they were stay-at-home mothers and turned to part-time entrepreneurship for some additional income, most women surveyed in this study sample stated in their responses that they were gainfully employed before transitioning into part-time or full-time entrepreneurship on their own. This finding infers that most women actively and intentionally approach entrepreneurship in an explicit, experimental or explorative manner, which is contradictory to past claims by researchers Welsh & Dragusin (2006), citing that the majority of women passively turn towards entrepreneurship due to need or unemployment status. The abstract themes of “freedom” and “flexibility” as primary motivators in female entrepreneurship were prevalent from the researcher’s textual and content analysis of this study’s qualitative portion of the results. Many women reported turning towards female entrepreneurship in order to increase their abilities to control their own schedules and lives through managing their own work hours as well as their time, thus suggesting a proactive and assertive approach towards becoming female entrepreneurs.

The study’s results generated significant findings in terms of the role and impact that digital media plays in female entrepreneurship. Half of the women in this study reported that they started and continue to conduct their businesses primarily online (*i.e.*, over 75%, as defined in the survey). This finding is further supported by significant results generated by 65.45% of

participants claiming that it would be both “very expensive” and “very difficult” to pursue entrepreneurship without digital media tools and social platforms. Consequently, 80% of participants in this study rated that digital media has been significantly “very useful” in their pursuit of female entrepreneurship.

Regarding specific digital media tools and platforms that female entrepreneurs are using to start and sustain their businesses, the researcher derived from participant open-ended responses that Facebook and Twitter (72.73% and 52.73%, respectively) are both significantly more important than traditional online tools such as email, websites and Wordpress (blogging) in helping female entrepreneurs operate their businesses. This is an interesting shift to note, as Facebook and Twitter are both social networking sites that encourage and promote two-way communications such as sharing information and content, as well as building communities and forming social relationships in an open, public manner.

Due to the option of private and direct messages on Facebook and Twitter, the researcher therefore deduced that perhaps many female entrepreneurs are beginning to use these social messaging features more frequently, and are therefore not as reliant on email as they might have been in the past. In fact, one survey participant from the study only listed two digital tools that she only employed for her cake-making business: Facebook and Instagram, two digital platforms that are both social- and visual-oriented in nature, with the former offering a private messaging feature as well, versus a more static, restrictive platform such as a traditional business website or email.

In response to the researcher asking which communication traits the participants found most important to operate their businesses, it was interesting to note that an equal 61.82% of participants across all types of businesses and industries openly listed both “writing” and

“listening” as the leading communication skills. While the researcher does not consider either communication trait to be objectively “passive” or “assertive” in nature – and therefore neither traits to be more “masculine” nor “feminine” by extension – together, both communication traits are absolutely essential in the formation of social relationships in an online-based environment. It is important to note, however, that while some participants did list traditionally more masculine-oriented communication traits such as “negotiating”, the results were not significant and may be attributed to the specific nature of their industry, such as the law or a more sales-oriented business, rather than a natural or preferred mode of communicating.

### **Limitations**

Time was a leading limitation in this study, as the formal approval for the researcher to ethically begin conduct the study on human participants took over a month and a half to obtain. Given the very limited timeframe of only a week, this did not allow sufficient time for the researcher to enlist more participants, although the researcher met the study’s initial goal of 50 participants with a total of 55 participants. While randomized, a sampling of 55 female entrepreneurs may not have been sufficient to generalize the study’s findings to the larger population of women business owners.

Threats and limitations regarding external and internal validity are varied in this study. Due to the open-ended nature of the qualitative-oriented questions, some participants may have answered too much or too little as compared to others. While bias was reduced by the anonymous nature of the survey questionnaire, subjectivity in the researcher’s own personal interpretation of participant responses may be likely. The researcher contends, however, that the content analyses of the participant responses generated more meaningful data for this study as opposed to the quantitative-based responses of the survey questionnaire. Given more time, the

researcher would have preferred to conduct more in-depth interviews and focus groups in order to analyze and code participant responses in more detail to unearth additional insights or data previously not captured in the quantitative questions of this study's survey questionnaire format.

Another limitation in this study related to the researcher's decision to not record participants' race and age, choosing instead to solely focus on the gender of the participants for the purposes of this study. While additional demographics of the participant sample were not deemed necessary for the purpose of this study, specifically, the researcher acknowledges that including diversity in a study is essential for more reliable results. For future research on the topic of female entrepreneurship, the researcher believes it might be interesting and valuable to study the role of race or age in relation to women starting and sustaining their businesses in order to uncover additional perspectives and findings. As past findings from studies such as Welsh & Dragusin (2006) have reported that women have typically been older when starting their businesses in comparison to men, it is hypothesized that women entrepreneurs will become younger and more racially as technological advances evolve and progress in the forthcoming decades.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the study's results and findings, the researcher concludes the following answers in response to the original research questions previously posed:

### **RQ1: What do women gain through female entrepreneurship?**

The researcher concludes that more women identify with becoming female entrepreneurs as they wish to gain independence from the traditionally more patriarchal, hierarchal and male-centric structure of the corporate workplace environment. The emerging themes based on the researcher's text and content analysis of the participants' responses displayed primary motivations that were emotional-oriented, and very rarely financial-based in nature. In this sense, women gain personal fulfillment and meaning through female entrepreneurship. Motivations most frequently cited in this study's findings included abstract concepts and ideas such as "passion", "love", "freedom" and "flexibility", used in the context of women rejecting traditional corporate and organizational structures in favor of creating their own opportunities and becoming their own employers through identifying as female entrepreneurs and becoming members of the female entrepreneurship community.

### **RQ2: Does digital media have an impact on female entrepreneurship?**

Based on the study's results, the researcher concludes that a strong, positive correlation between digital media and female entrepreneurship does exist, with digital media significantly reported by the majority of survey participants as a very useful component in helping women pursue and operate their businesses. The impact of digital media on female entrepreneurship also includes relieving financial burdens on women who wish to start their own businesses, with the majority of female entrepreneurs in this study stating that it would be very expensive to form and grow their businesses without digital media tools and platforms. The majority of women also

cited that it would be very difficult for them to start and sustain businesses without any digital media tools or platforms, thus reinforcing the significantly helpful impact of digital media on helping women start and sustain their businesses.

**RQ3: Is there a correlation between digital media and communication traits in female entrepreneurship?**

The researcher affirms there was a significant, positive correlation between the specific digital media tools, social platforms as well as the communication traits listed by participants as “most important” in starting and sustaining their businesses. Half of the female entrepreneurs surveyed in this sample noted that they primarily conduct their businesses online, over 75% of the time. The majority of participants listed Facebook and Twitter as the significant primary digital media tools employed in operating their businesses. Additionally, an equal number of participants reported “writing” and “listening” as their primary communication skills, communication traits that, in combination with each other, are essential in the formation and maintenance of social relationships in online-based environments.

While past studies in the literature review claimed that relationship-building and “rapport”-oriented communications are “feminized” communication patterns (Welsh & Dragusin, 2006; Thebaud, 2010; Orser, Elliott & Leck, 2011), the researcher argues that building rapport is now a contextual necessity on digital and social platforms, such as building a loyal Facebook and Twitter following over time through strengthening and nurturing customer relationships on a long-term basis, and has no bearing on communication patterns being either “masculine” or “feminine” in this perspective.

The overall findings derived in this research study support a significant, positive correlation between digital media and female entrepreneurship. Through the availability and

utilization of digital media tools and social platforms, women are identifying as female entrepreneurs and participating in the process of female entrepreneurship with less difficulty and financial costs. Women who identify themselves as female entrepreneurs do so because they want to gain more freedom and flexibility from traditional patriarchal corporate structures and environments to pursue their personal passions and hobbies, leading to increased sense of fulfillment and meaning.

While it is important to note that writing and listening are necessary communication skills in order for female entrepreneurs of all ages and races to succeed in the digital age, diversifying their communication skillset as well as business operations to include other platforms than Facebook and Twitter will be a sound strategy for women entrepreneurs in the future to avoid being reliant on one single digital media tool or platform to conduct their business. For future studies, conducting further research with in-depth interviews or focus groups, and encouraging participants to note their ages and racial backgrounds, would continue to enrich the existing literature on female entrepreneurship and contribute valuable insight and data to this still understudied topic.



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## **Appendix A**

The survey attached hereto is the actual survey questionnaire used to collect data and participant responses for this research study.

### Survey Questionnaire

1. **Which industry does your business belong to?**
  - a. Accounting, Banking & Finance
  - b. Administrative Services
  - c. Communications, Marketing & Public Relations
  - d. Construction & Real Estate
  - e. Education
  - f. Engineering
  - g. Fashion, Beauty & Retail
  - h. Fitness, Nutrition & Wellness
  - i. Restaurant & Food Services
  - j. Technology
  - k. Other
2. **Which scenario currently describes your employment situation?**
  - a. Full-time entrepreneur (*i.e., my business is my primary income*)
  - b. Full-time solopreneur (*i.e., my freelance projects provide several incomes*)
  - c. Full-time employee, with a part-time business on the side
  - d. Part-time employee, with a part-time business on the side
  - e. Currently not employed, and starting/growing my business
  - f. Other
3. **Is your business conducted primarily (*i.e., more than 75%*):**
  - a. Online, via the Internet and digital media
  - b. Offline, via in person meetings, with a physical office or retail space
  - c. Both online and offline in equal amounts
4. **Where have you primarily (*i.e., more than 75%*) found the necessary financial, legal and/or educational resources in order to start or grow your business?**
  - a. Primarily online, via the Internet, websites, forums and digital media
  - b. Primarily offline, via in-person networking events, meet-ups, trainings and workshops
  - c. Both online and offline in equal amounts
5. **In 2-3 short sentences, please explain why you chose to pursue your own business.**

6. List the three (3) most important digital media and digital communication tools, networks or platforms you use, or will plan on using, when operating your business (e.g., email, Ebay, Etsy, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, etc.).

a. \_\_\_\_\_  
 b. \_\_\_\_\_  
 c. \_\_\_\_\_

7. List the three (3) most important communication skills or traits you utilize the most when operating your business (e.g., listening, negotiating, selling, speaking, writing, etc.).

a. \_\_\_\_\_  
 b. \_\_\_\_\_  
 c. \_\_\_\_\_

8. On a scale of 1 (*very easy*) to 5 (*very difficult*), how would you rate starting, promoting and/or operating your business without digital media and digital communication tools?

VERY EASY

VERY DIFFICULT

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

9. On a scale of 1 (*not expensive*) to 5 (*very expensive*), how would you rate starting, promoting and/or operating your business without digital media and digital communication tools?

NOT EXPENSIVE

VERY EXPENSIVE

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

10. On a scale of 1 (*not useful*) to 5 (*very useful*), how would you rate the use of digital media and digital communication tools to starting, promoting and/or operating your business?

NOT USEFUL

VERY USEFUL

1                      2                      3                      4                      5