

Effects of Gender Stereotyping on the Adoption of Digital Technologies by Female-Owned Smmes in the Catering and Accommodation Sector in Gauteng - South Africa

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Abstract

Female owned small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) play a role in the economic development of South Africa. Nonetheless, digital technology adoption remains challenging. The study investigates how gender stereotyping affects the adoption of digital technologies in Gauteng's catering and accommodation sector via a feminist standpoint framework. A qualitative exploratory design sufficed, where 18 female owned SMMEs participated in in-depth interviews. Data was analysed using NVivo software through thematic analysis. Findings revealed that gender stereotyping causes low self-esteem leading to imposition of self-limiting factors among female owned SMMEs. Therefore, controlling stereotype enablers and building self-confidence for female owned businesses is necessary. The study contributes a mechanism for deconstructing traditional practices hindering the adoption of digital technologies by SMMEs in the catering and accommodation sector.

Keywords: *digital adoption, digital technologies, gender roles, SMMEs, stereotypes.*

Introduction

The hospitality sector is one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors in the world, as it plays a crucial role in the economy of many nations through job creation and entrepreneurial opportunities, and South Africa is no exception (Department of Tourism, 2022). Being a highly competitive industry, hospitality thrives on adopting digital technologies. Female owned SMMEs in Gauteng's catering and accommodation sector would benefit from adopting smart locking door systems, chatbots, smart menus, Wi-Fi, internet of things, online payment, online booking systems, mobile technology and social media (Pamnugkas, 2019; Bakare and Minah-Eeba, 2019; Kamelia, Noorhassa, Sanjaya and Mulyana, 2014). Under the prevailing circumstances, maximisation of the benefits of digital technologies falls short because these technologies and the resources necessary to access them are unevenly distributed between the two main societal gender groups causing a gender bias in their adoption (OECD, 2018).

While previous studies address the different aspects of digital technology adoption by SMMEs to facilitate the digital adoption process, female-owned enterprises continue lagging behind and hence remain disadvantaged in the maximisation of benefits offered by digital technologies. The focus of previous studies in the field underpins the impact of digital technologies on performance and enterprise growth (Matekenya and Moyo, 2022; Bhorat et al., 2018; Lukele and Soumonni, 2020). Yet others focus on digital transformation strategies on how to improve business transactions and processes while fostering resilience among SMMEs in the African context (Achieng and Malatji, 2022; Vontris, Chaudhuri and Chatterjee, 2022; Schwertner, 2017). Furthermore, Mametja, Lebambo and Tichaawa (2023) examined the push-in and push-back factors affecting the adoption of digital technologies by female-owned micro enterprises in the South African tourism industry. The findings of this study focused on effects of gender stereotyping on digital adoption of women owning catering and accommodation businesses in Gauteng. Using a qualitative feminist approach, the study highlights how gender stereotypes lead to low self-esteem among female business owners hence affecting how they adopt digital technologies for their businesses.

Literature Review

Adoption of Digital Technologies by Female-Owned Smmes

Digital technologies have disrupted how business is conducted around the world (International Labour Organisation, 2022). It has created new possibilities for SMMEs, especially those owned by women (Mametja, Lebambo and Tichaawa, 2023). These technologies have become a fundamental part of business, that omitting or ignoring them poses a threat to any business (Mdhluli, 2024; Achieng and Malatji, 2022). The South African government has implemented several programmes to support female-owned SMMEs (Mothiba, 2022; National Planning Commission, 2024; International Trade Administration, 2024; SMETech, 2023). However, despite efforts to empower SMMEs female-owned enterprises in catering and accommodation in Gauteng lag in adoption of digital technologies (Mametja, Lebambo and Tichaava, 2023; Bvuma and Marnewick, 2020). This lag hinders their ability to compete, reduce operational costs, stagnation and diminished profitability (Irene, 2019; Bvuma and Marnewick, 2020; Ong, Habidin, Salleh and Fuzi, 2020). Meanwhile in comparing male to female entrepreneurs, male entrepreneurs exhibit a better understanding of how to take advantage of digital technologies to grow their businesses than their female counterparts (Oggero *et al.*, 2020; Orser and Riding, 2018; SMETech, 2023; Paul and Thompson, 2018; Burger, 2023; Teo, Theo and Feng, 1996; Ibrahim, Croxton and Buthelezi, 2021).

Gender Stereotyping

The concept of gender stereotyping is better understood by first defining stereotypes and stereotyping. A stereotype is a set of common characteristics assigned to a social group (Joseph, O'Connell and Bongar, 2023; United Nations Human Rights Commission, 2014). Gender stereotyping, however, refers to specific characteristics and roles assigned to persons based on their gender (Ellemers, 2018). Akinlolu (2022) further defines stereotyping as the roles of femininity and masculinity. In Gauteng's catering and accommodation sector, gender stereotyping takes prominence and affects female-owned SMMEs' ability to adopt digital technologies. This is facilitated by the fact that South Africa is rich in and proud of its African heritage, in which female owned SMMEs find themselves exposed to sociocultural norms that present challenges in the successful adoption of digital technologies.

The lack of confidence and time restrictions come into play because women constantly multitask by running a business and still doing all the chores at home (Carranza, Dhakal and Love, 2018). OECD (2018) terms this time restriction challenge 'time poverty' and argues that it arises from the inability of women to possess the free time to attend to other issues. Female owned SMMEs often manoeuvre through sociocultural hindrances because of their gendered roles, which male-owned enterprises do not have to contend with. Gerdeman (2019), who argues that once a person experiences stereotyping, both their capabilities and self-esteem come into question further advances this thought. Other scholars also confirm that belonging to a stereotyped group especially for women, affects their self-confidence causing them to question their abilities, leading to failure to prove their potential and self-worth (Coffman, Collis and Kulkarni, 2023).

The predicament in which female SMMEs in catering and accommodation in Gauteng find themselves confirms previous findings, suggesting that women-owned businesses are subjected to gender-based prejudices (Irene, 2017). With more culturally powerful groups in society continuously undermining the capabilities of female-owned SMMEs to efficiently operate digitally enabled businesses in the hospitality industry, women's self-confidence still needs to improve. Of concern, is that women continue doubting their abilities, choosing to conform to stereotyped perspectives of their roles and capabilities according to the dominant social norms. Notably, Coffman (2014) revealed that a high incidence of dominant gender self-stereotyping is related to a high incidence of low self-confidence.

Even though stereotypes are not permanent, they are not easily altered since they become internalised over time (Gersham and Cikara, 2023). Gender-based behaviours' socialisation begins at an early stage in an individual's life (Kollmeyer et al., 2018). The learning process assumes a continuous format where the individual learns the behaviours and roles of their respective genders as prescribed by their primary mentors, by way of direct experiences and by observation method (Eagly et al., 2019). These stereotypes are reinforced by unspoken systems of reward and punishment. For example, desired behaviours prescribed by social groups or taught by primary custodians are associated with rewards, while punishment accompanies undesirable behaviour. A lack of these factors creates an unfavourable environment for continued practices of stereotyping. As the Brice Foundation (2020) observed, stereotypes are driven by witnessing consequences others suffered or rewards for favoured actions. The dynamics behind stereotypes of female owned

SMMEs in the catering and accommodation sector in Gauteng, whether self-imposed or projected by others, follow the same principles. Because acts of stereotyping are seldom reprimanded, people continually engage in them, as it is perceived to be normal (Ramasurbramanian, 2005).

Besides learning stereotypes from direct exposure and observation, media plays a vital role in their dissemination (Santonnicola et al., 2023). The different types of media serve as platforms to share stereotyped information and images across the globe (Arendt, 2023). Through the broadcast and transmission of stereotypical content, people may project certain biases on some groups, creating unfavourable perceptions about that group (Ward and Grower, 2020). Gender stereotyping, unfortunately, leads to discrimination and discourages women from pursuing male-dominated fields, including venturing into business (Ellemers, 2018).

Self-stereotyping

Self-stereotyping occurs when members of a stereotyped group internalise and identify themselves by attributes given to a group (Eriksson, Smith and Smith., 2017). Dawd, Oumar and Kukur (2021) define self-stereotyping as the way those ascribed to a marginalised group identify themselves with attributes of a group instead of attributes unrelated to the ingroup.

Since members of an oppressed class hold a stereotyped perspective of themselves, their self-confidence is compromised, making them feel vulnerable and hence encouraging them to seek a sense of belonging and protection from members of the same group (Hogg, 2023; Cadinu, Latrofa and Carnaghi, 2012). Previous studies like those conducted by Latrofa et al., (2012) and Spears et al., (1997) show that self-stereotyping is more prevalent when the intergroup attributes are strong or hold prominence in the assessment by group members, unlike when the attributes of the intra-groups are stronger (Van Veelen et al, 2016. For instance, negative stereotyping is believed to hinder the building of the self-esteem of ingroup members (Oswald and Chapleau, 2010).

Stereotypes cement themselves in the decision-making process of female SMMEs where venturing into digital adoption of technologies is clouded by their beliefs of self-inadequacies and beliefs that they are not skilled enough, and cannot afford to adopt technologies. This compels them to adopt less complex digital technologies to accomplish operational and basic tasks (Cariolle and Carroll, 2020; OECD, 2021; Fosu, 2018). Moreover, because gender roles are taught by an individual's influential people and reinforced by rewards, they are believable thereby perpetuate

the tendency of female business owners to continue lagging in digital adoption in catering and accommodation sector in Gauteng. This continued lag on adoption of digital technologies unfortunately continually deprives SMMEs owned by women from maximising the benefits brought about by their use (OECD, 2021OECD, 2021). During and post Covid-19 pandemic, SMMEs continue looking for ways to propel their businesses and reach out to new markets and increase return on investment (ROI) and one of the ways is through the adoption of digital technologies which continues to elude them. Self-stereotyping lends itself to tenets of system justification theory by legitimising the practice by in-group members in cases where unfair status/positioning exists (Laurin, Kay and Shepard, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

This study makes use of the feminist standpoint theory. Feminist standpoint theory (FST) sometimes referred to as standpoint theory is associated with the sociologist Harstock (1983) published in her ground breaking publication money, sex and power (Hekman,1997; Harding, 2004). One of the main objectives governing feminist standpoint theories lies in its focus on establishing the importance of feminism and cementing its usefulness in research, in the social sciences and humanities (Wasco and Campbell, 2000). The theory exposes the unfair treatment of men and women fuelled by existing power dynamics in social settings (Wood, 2005). Based on strong objectivity and situated knowledge FST observes that suppressed groups have the advantage in examining a phenomenon from the point of view of the privileged position. It argues that the knower possesses a privileged advantage based on their location or social standing (Halpern, 2019). Adopting the FST for the study, gave the research participants an advantage by explaining the challenges and other issues faced in the digital technology adoption process for their businesses from the viewpoint of a disadvantaged group by virtue of their gender. The study applied a subjective approach making it possible for interaction with female business owners to understand the deeper social and cultural issues rarely addressed in research. Grounding itself on the suppositions of FST, the analysis and interpretations of the research findings reflect the need for gender parity in the adoption of technologies in the hospitality sector in Gauteng.

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was taken for the research, which employed a feminist standpoint lens because the study involved gender aspects. The study used an exploratory design to uncover the underlying social and cultural issues affecting the successful adoption of technologies in the catering and accommodation sector in Gauteng. In-depth interviews were used as a data collection tool. In-depth interviews provide a means of obtaining detailed data concerning the phenomenon under study (Showcat and Parveen, 2017). An interview schedule was used as a guide to the questions presented to the participants. The target population of the study was all female owned SMMEs in catering and accommodation in Gauteng. Gauteng, the country's business hub and holding the highest number of SMMEs, totalling 885, 356 in 2020 provided a conducive study environment to conduct the study (Seda, 2020). Applying the principle of saturation to determine the sample size, 18 female owned SMMEs and managers in the catering and accommodation sector in Gauteng were interviewed (ten female business owners and eight female managers). A combination of purposeful and snowballing techniques was used to select the sample. As Browne (2005) suggests, purposeful sampling, also known as judgemental sampling, allows other sampling techniques to be used together with it. It is inevitable for all investigations to formulate inclusion criteria that help the researcher to either include or eliminate a candidate (Salkind, 2010). Through NVivo, themes including self-limiting gender stereotypes, insufficient time and resources, socialised exclusion and marginalised, lack of interest/fear/lack of confidence and others were identified to interpret the findings, from which conclusions were drawn.

Figure 1.1 Sample of transcribed interviews

Self-limiting gender stereotypes

<Files\\Transcription BM008> - § 1 reference coded [1,50% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1,50% Coverage

You find that women even if not in fulltime in the business like I am, mostly part-time, you find that they are not employing people, they themselves are the business. So, they do everything, so it becomes so difficult because you wear all the hats,

<Files\\Transcription LN005> - § 1 reference coded [4,02% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 4,02% Coverage

Yea, I think digital inclusion for women it comes from the times back when women were always excluded in everything. So technology it was looked before as something for men only. This is the root for women not being included in digital. But in my point of view, women they women tend to be included more now because women are now fighting for their rights. We see women now entrepreneurs, so I think although we are still behind there is ahh hmmm an improvement.

<Files\\Transcription ME003> - § 5 references coded [18,53% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 5,52% Coverage

Well, I will start with courage. A woman in her right is capable to do what men can do but only a few have courage. Because ah for example, we now have women who are auto mechanics, but this function was mostly designated for men. But we have women with courage who today work as mechanics, today they work as pilots, today they work as ah very qualified information technology specialists, we have women who are Ministers, female Presidents, I mean these women have courage not because they have not experienced this discrimination but they decided to ignore and went on ahead because they are courageous and they are an inspiration.

Findings

The findings of the study revealed a high frequency of SMMEs interviewed who highlighted gender stereotyping as one of the main reasons affecting the successful adoption of digital technologies in the catering and accommodation sector in Gauteng. Twelve of 18 SMMEs/managers about 67.7% pointed to self-limiting factors as the major challenge in adopting digital technologies, with insufficient time and resources scoring a similar margin.

Table 1.1 Stereotype factors arising from primary data collected from interviews

Gender barriers to the adoption of digital technologies	Frequency out of 18	Percentage %
Awareness and technological savviness	15	83
Self-limiting gender stereotypes	12	67.7
Insufficient time and resources	12	67.7
Poor technological leadership and incentivisation	07	38.9
Other barriers	06	33
Lack of interest/fear/lack of confidence	05	27
Socialised exclusion and marginalisation	04	22

In this case, the digital gender divide partially arises from the impact of gender stereotyping which affects digital technology adoption (Leed Initiative, 2022; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020). Regrettably, this has led to female owned SMMEs missing out on the use of faster business transactions like faster payment options, faster information sharing, heightened exposure to digital and security theft among other benefits foregone that would provide a lifeline for their businesses (UN75, 2020 ; Alton, 2019). Moreover, the digital gender divide not only affects women's adoption of technologies but inhibits SMMEs' active engagement in entrepreneurial activities (Fawcett, 2019; Marlow and Patton, 2005).

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate how gender stereotyping affects the adoption of digital technologies by female owned SMMEs in the catering and accommodation sector in Gauteng. The findings showed a high incidence of gender stereotyping resulting from widely practised sociocultural activities entrenched in South African society and hindering the successful adoption and implementation of digital technologies by female owned businesses. At least 12 of 18 research participants cited gender and sociocultural practices as major hindrances to their adoption of digital technologies.

This is in line with what other studies concluded. For example, Bimber (2000) found that sociocultural factors hinder female owned businesses in the adoption of digital technologies. Other related studies indicate that gender-specific elements were responsible for women's perceptions that they lacked the skill to operate and run these technologies as efficiently as their male counterparts (United Nations Development Programme, 2021).

These perceptions lead to low self-esteem among female owned SMMEs because stereotypes permeate business, school, employment and professional settings and other areas where women are continually suppressed. This suppression comes from gender roles assigned to men and women from birth. South Africa follows a patriarchal system, which relegates women to household chores such as childbearing and rearing and other domestic activities (Master, Meltzoff and Cheryan, 2021). Similarly, female owned SMMEs face ridicule that reinforces tendencies of self-doubt and lack of self-esteem in their capabilities to adopt digital technologies in their businesses. The deeply intertwined cultural beliefs cause this about women's capabilities, which translates to a lack of confidence in themselves and a widening digital gender divide (USAID, 2020). On the other hand, female managers and supervisors in the hospitality industry experienced the same stereotypical judgements that made them question their abilities to lead and make sound decisions in their leadership positions.

Another finding emerging from the study was that apart from the gender stereotypes projected to ingroup members by those outside the stereotyped group, female owned SMMEs in the catering and accommodation sector in Gauteng exhibited behaviours of self-stereotyping. That is, they accepted the attributes projected by the group onto themselves. Such behaviours encourage women to confine themselves within limits prescribed by or to the group, limiting themselves (Bordalo, Coffman, Gennaioli and Schleifer, 2016). Consequently, female owned SMMEs set self-limiting factors that hinder digital technology adoption. One of the business owners interviewed:

The tendency is to ask, what will people say? If my children are in the same grade as the one I have to start with, what will they say? However, she forgets that her child is in that grade because that is the right age and he has the opportunity to study but as a mother, maybe she did not have that opportunity to further her studies. (M03)

Some women business owners impose self-limiting factors on their capabilities without realising that the barriers they perceive require a change of their mindset rather than shifting the blame or focusing on problems arising from external forces. This causes a more serious challenge because women fail to acknowledge that they hold the key to solving the challenges in their digital adoption process by introspecting themselves. The study further revealed that female owned SMMEs in catering and accommodation in Gauteng were worried more about protecting and conforming to group characteristics, reducing their capability to adopt and engage in technologies that are more complex.

Insufficient time and resources resulted from gender stereotyping, facilitated by sociocultural norms and gender roles that assign segregated activities by gender. This tends to limit women to chores associated with running a home, while men are assigned roles and activities outside the home, including running a business. This view is in line with UNCTAD (2014) observations that women who own enterprises usually have to contend with limited time to manage their businesses, unlike male-owned businesses. A downside of time limitation for female owned enterprises on the African continent is the missed opportunities for women to obtain the necessary skills, exposure and education critical to the successful adoption of digital technologies for their businesses. This study further contends that the time limitation for women business owners in the catering and accommodation sector in Gauteng is two-tiered. First, time limitation relates to the demand imposed on women to accomplish other tasks such as home chores that male owned SMMEs do not have to contend with. One of the female business owners stated:

Women have proven they can run businesses like their male counterparts. It is only that they are overburdened by other issues and being the ones to do domestic affairs of their households, lack of finances and the knowhow of operating machines or software that are behind the running of technologies. M015

Therefore, women choosing to run a business face the challenge of running a home and a business simultaneously, leaving them with time limitations compared to their male counterparts. The second aspect of time limitation relates to the demand for constant engagement with clients through various digital platforms or technologies, taking away time needed to attend to other tasks. One of the female business owners stated:

Also, the fact that I'm supposed to remain engaged at all times is just energy-sapping because I want to be elsewhere but because I want my products to be there, to be kwon, it means that I have to be online most of the time which is quite time-consuming and energy sapping. (M07)

The lack of knowledge of existing digital technologies such as artificial intelligence-aided technologies that mimic human interactions with clients, saves staff time needed to attend to other duties (Kurniawan, Fachri, Elevantita, Suryadi and Dew, 2015). The lack of planning and strategy in task execution exposed by exhaustion from constant engagement with clients and the pressure to complete other duties calls for female owned SMMEs to acquaint themselves with information and access to digital technologies to help them maximise their benefits.

Another finding was the need for awareness and technological savviness. The female business owners interviewed expressed the necessity

to acquire digital skills for them to be able to steer the digital technology adoption for their businesses as shown below.

This kind of business requires one to understand how to employ technologies to operate and run the business. When I decided to go into this business, I did a digital marketing course where I learned how to maximise digital technologies. (M02)

In contrast, another participant's perspective was different:

Hmm, when we started, firstly, I am not so advanced with the use of technologies and my husband is not into technology, laughs. We are old people as you can see. So, when we started, we would look for client's door-to-door and do physical presentations. (M03)

While participant M02 acknowledges her technological abilities, participant M03 reveals her challenges in digital technology skills necessary to steer her business technologically while maximising their benefits. Fifteen of the eighteen participants expressed the need to acquire digital skills signalling the existence of a digital gender gap in the catering and accommodation sector in Gauteng. Targeted programmes aimed at training women, networking opportunities, accessibility to funding and discouragement of reward and punishment systems perpetuating gender stereotypes is necessary. Sadly, the continued lack of digital skills for female business owners means that they remain on the periphery of the digital ecosystem (Krieger-Boden and Sorgner, 2018).

Finally, the study revealed that female owned business owners in catering and accommodation in Gauteng lack interest in digital adoption of technologies coupled with fear of exploring the technological ecosystem usually perceived as a male dominated field based on their limited experience and skill. This was expressed by one of the business owners interviewed:

The lack of interest. When a person lacks interest in something, they will put little effort to find out or even learn about those issues. (M012)

For some of the business owners who have experienced the backlash that comes from going against societal expectations may cultivate a fear resulting from consequences suffered previously and which might be meted out on them. To remain within socially prescribed boundaries, women tend to legitimise stereotypical behaviours (Laurin et al., 2011). For example, women business owners may have not had an opportunity to pursue courses in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields acting as a prelude to a good foundation for acquiring digital skills. Often, stereotypes compel society to accept STEM as appropriate for boys/men than for girls/women (Mukhwana, Abuya, Matandra,

Omumbo and Mabuka, 2020). Against this background, female business owners' interest in acquiring digital skills might be low.

Recommendations

Since individuals are socialised and taught stereotypes at an early age, unlearning these stereotypes can be challenging. Therefore, a recommendation is to begin socialising with individuals without teaching or enforcing stereotypes early to ensure that they grow up disassociating themselves from stereotypes. Second, since stereotypes are taught and reinforced by primary custodians like parents, teachers and family members, measures to deconstruct stereotypes through media, workshops, seminars, and campaigns should be targeted at them. Also emerging from the study was the pattern facilitating the promulgation of stereotypes through social exclusion for those seen as non-compliant in terms of the behaviour of individuals according to prescribed social and gender roles. Social exclusion takes various forms, like unfair treatment of female-owned SMMEs and sabotage of female managers' efforts at their workplaces. Undoubtedly, the reward and punishment systems serve to perpetuate gender and other forms of stereotypes. Therefore, to resolve the issue of stereotyping, archaic gender norms must be denounced, and local and traditional leaders in the community must be engaged. Lastly, government and other stakeholders need to put more policies and strategies in place to deconstruct self-stereotyping instead of focusing on stereotypes generally. If no measures are implemented to deconstruct self-stereotyping, many policies to achieve digital inclusion are misplaced.

Conclusion and Future Research

This study sheds light on the issues arising from continued gender stereotyping practices in female owned SMMEs in Gauteng's catering and accommodation sector. Additionally, the study showed how female SMME owners engage in self-stereotyping, leading to self-limiting factors that hinder the effective adoption and implementation of digital technologies, including proposed change policies by different stakeholders. Lastly, due to a lack of sufficient resources, the study was restricted to primarily urban-based enterprises in Gauteng. A look at the other variables involving ethnicity and rural based enterprises could add another dimension to the study. A different methodological approach like photo voice or oral history would enrich the scarce theoretical data on feminist research in South Africa.

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