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Disaggregating womens' agency in digital spaces in the constrained pandemic context: A postfeminist sensemaking perspective'

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Abstract

The study relies on a feminist poststructuralist investigation of 28 women digital entrepreneurs in the constrained pandemic context to develop an analytical framework that utilises discourse analysis and the conceptualisation of a postfeminist sensibility in women's digital entrepreneurship. The research shows how women mobilise elements of postfeminism within an unfolding sensemaking process of three discursive sensemaking practices: Choosing digital entrepreneurship from home as a career, (De)constructing selves and complying and resisting the burden of the status quo as ways to make sense of gender disruptions and conflicts and the false promise of gender egalitarianism in digital entrepreneurship.

Keywords

digitalisation, women entrepreneurs, agency, constrained contexts, sensemaking

Introduction

This article explores how women discursively constitute the agentic potential of digital entrepreneurship in a pandemic crisis through the analytical lens of postfeminism (Gill et al., 2017). In the context of work, systemic disparities continue to persist (Pullen and Vachhani, 2021) despite the significant increase in policies and practices concerning equality, diversity and inclusion (Adamson et al., 2021). As a result, these aspects, interspersed with the shift towards digitalisation in the pandemic, are encouraging women into careers in digital entrepreneurship, although most studies to date have been gender blind (Manolova et al., 2020). At the same time, a postfeminist critique has

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been expressed in women's digital entrepreneurship research with professionally educated women digital entrepreneurs in the Global North, albeit pre-pandemic (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017), where the ideal of the open, meritocratic digital space has rendered gendered inequalities omnipresent but invisible. This gives a shallow view of women's independence and ignores how gender still shapes work experiences, a critique astutely discussed in entrepreneurship scholarship (Ahl and Marlow, 2021), organisational literature (Lewis and Benschop, 2023) and gender studies (Keisu and Brodin, 2022).

What remains relatively unexplored, however, is how postfeminism, comprising related contemporary themes and discourses about gender (Gill et al., 2017), is understood, experienced and negotiated by women becoming digital entrepreneurs in a constrained context such as the pandemic. To address this research gap, we adopt a feminist poststructural methodology to analyse materials from a qualitative, interview-based study that opens the possibility for an agency contingent on the discourses at play and positioning within them. Our work draws on the tenets of discourse analysis and is grounded by the understanding that words are constructed by the social realities of participants (Weedon, 1997) and that we can understand these constructivist processes by analysing discourse (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In this way, we understand gender not as fixed properties of the individual, but as discursive effects. We focus on a group of 28 white, educated, professional women digital founder-entrepreneurs across a variety of sectors who had founded a business on their own amidst the pandemic, were responsible for an online business completely reliant on digital technology, and had been operating for a minimum of one year. We focus on this group because they are relatively absent from crisis and entrepreneurship literature, whilst critical to economic prosperity (Kelly and McAdam, 2023). In addition, as educated, white, middle-class Western class women, they would have to make sense of and construct professional reputations, career choices and feminine roles (Özkazanç-Pan and Pullen, 2020) as they became entrepreneurs in digital entrepreneurship as a site of gendered neoliberalism (Heizmann and Liu, 2022).

Within this article, we explore the research question: 'How is the agentic potential of digital entrepreneurship discursively constituted in the pandemic by women?' In addressing this question, this study contributes theoretically, empirically and methodologically. First, by paying attention to how women engage in crisis sensemaking through a postfeminist sensibility in becoming digital entrepreneurs in a constrained context, we bring postfeminist theory which is largely produced by feminist media scholars and scholars of gender and organisation and entrepreneurship in the United Kingdom and Europe (Nadin et al., 2020; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017) into conversation with a body of theorising on crises sensemaking largely in organisational settings (Glynn and Watkiss, 2020; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). The latter body of work has defined sensemaking as 'a process, prompted by violated expectations, that involves attending to and bracketing cues in the environment, creating intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action and thereby enacting a more ordered environment from which further cues can be drawn' (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 67), the nuances of which, have not yet been given due consideration in the pandemic (Christianson and Barton, 2020), particularly for women digital entrepreneurs. Second and relatedly, we build on and respond to the call by Lewis et al. (2022) to mobilise the concept of postfeminist sensibility as a sensemaking heuristic and the need from an ethical standpoint to form a deeper understanding of how on a subjective level 'women manage the effect of neo-liberalised organisational systems and cultures that continue to exclude them from equal opportunities' (Baker and Kelan, 2019, p. 71). A third related contribution is methodological stemming from the use of feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis that aligns with recent calls to draw on feminist poststructuralism that pays specific attention to gender, subjectivity and entrepreneurship (Harrison et al., 2024; Lewis et al., 2022) and broader interdisciplinary calls for post-qualitative inquiry in a turbulent global environment (Keim et al., 2024). The remainder of the article is structured as

follows. First, we present our analytical framework, followed by our methodological rationale and research design process. Then, we present our empirical findings. Finally, we discuss our contributions, limitations and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical framework

Women's entrepreneurship, digitalisation and the constrained pandemic context

Our study builds on two strands of thinking, distinguishing agency and women digital entrepreneurs. One body of literature is that of cyberfeminist scholars stemming from the work of Plant (1997) and a conceptual framework by Rindova et al. (2009) that forwards digital spaces as a context for entrepreneurial agency, empowerment and emancipation. Studies within the domain of classic cyberfeminist research, examining the relationship between gender and digital technology, highlight the significant potential of the Internet as a forum for women's empowerment (Shukla et al., 2021). It is suggested that the Internet, with its protection of individual privacy, may provide a safe space for negotiating the challenges women encounter in their day-to-day offline lives (McAdam et al., 2019) and in doing so, help them realise their entrepreneurial potential. Empirical studies show how women successfully establish digital start-ups to commercialise their innovations through digitalisation (Ughetto et al., 2020) to enlarge their networks, acquire local and international market knowledge (Pergelova et al., 2019) and access capital and funding (Orser et al., 2020). In contrast, critical cyberfeminist scholarship argues the presence of gender disparities in digitalised settings in terms of access, usage, skills and gendered assumptions and norms in relation to digital technologies (Heizmann and Liu, 2022). The pandemic is exacerbating inequality in various aspects (Kamberidou and Pascall, 2020), including gender disparities and the digital divide. Debates on the conceptualisation of the digital divide for women entrepreneurs are developing and refining (Kelly and McAdam, 2023); most focus on the unequal access, knowledge and usage between men and women in the Global South (Kamberidou and Pascall, 2020), building on studies pointing to minority populations experiencing digital exclusion in comparison to majority populations (van Dijk, 2013). Furthermore, the pandemic is a constrained context that has gender differentiated impacts (Birhanu et al., 2022), and women carry greater caring and household responsibilities than their male peers (Hughes et al., 2022). This thinking is embedded in the empirical study by Meliou (2020), who explored how women entrepreneurs mobilise familial resources to navigate the gendered challenges faced during the persistent financial crisis and austerity in Greece, a country affected by the acute socioeconomic crisis. A critical reading of the sombre findings of women entrepreneurs and their experiences in the constrained context of the pandemic lends themselves to the tenets of a postfeminist gender regime (Gill, 2017), which point to the attainability of feminist goals such as being entrepreneurial and responsibility for self-management whilst embracing traditional femininity with values of motherhood and domestic care work.

Postfeminism

Feminist scholars acknowledge the fluidity and contested interpretations of postfeminism across gender, organisation and entrepreneurship (Benschop and Lewis, 2024). Drawing on poststructural and constructionist perspectives, postfeminism has been conceptualised by the discursive psychologist Rosalind Gill (2007, p. 148) as a 'sensibility' manifesting as gendered neoliberalism as follows: The values of individualism, freedom and choice, a reassertion of essential sex differences between men and women and an emphasis on continuous self-development and transformation

coupled with extensive surveillance and monitoring. This approach relates to Gill and Orgad's (2018) work through recognising significant interrelations between neoliberal and postfeminist discourses on resilience, which argues for feminist solidarity in the context of uncertainty and crisis. Gill (2017, p. 610) suggests that 'the (increasingly psychologised) postfeminist logic encourages individuals to cultivate the right kinds of dispositions for surviving in neoliberal society: aspiration, self-confidence and resilience'. Following this line of argument, McRobbie (2020) questions whether digital technologies disrupt the gender power in society using the prism of perfect-imperfect-resilience (P-I-R), that configures notions of adhering to the feminine ideal, overcoming structural adversity and being resilient. Of concern is that postfeminism, as a gendered form of neoliberalism, leads to a harmful subjectivity which means women are at risk of becoming embroiled in dynamics of self-blame, anxiety and exhaustion (Litosseliti et al., 2019).

Gill's (2017) sensibility as a seminal contribution was offered for analysing postfeminist media culture such as television, films and popular fiction and this theorisation has been central to the gender and entrepreneurship field through contributing to understanding how women define and experience self-employment (Ahl and Marlow, 2021) and digital self-enterprise (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Elias and Gill, 2018; Pritchard et al., 2019) as a career for women. Among the voices in the latter literature, Pritchard et al. (2019) draw on business students to ascertain their responses to visual representations of entrepreneurial success focusing on key images integral to the marketing of Mattel's Entrepreneur Barbie as a postfeminist 'cultural motif'. In relation to digital self-enterprise, a study by Duffy and Hund (2015) explores how online fashion bloggers represent their branded personae as enterprising feminine subjects through a textual analysis of media posts by leading fashion bloggers and identify a form of entrepreneurial femininity that draws upon post-feminist sensibilities and the contemporary logic of self-branding. We build on and extend this literature by noting the lack of empirical study of women digital entrepreneurs to map their experiences of agency. Recent insights suggest that sensemaking as an analytical lens may be a useful way to conceptualise how individuals enact agency and adjust to constrained conditions (Christianson and Barton, 2020).

Sensemaking within postfeminism in the pandemic

The basic idea of sensemaking is that 'reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs' (Weick, 1993, p. 635). A sensemaking perspective proposes a process triggered by disruptions to schemas and consists of enactment, selection and retention, through which individuals make sense of equivocal environments (Weick, 2020). In the traditional social-cognitivist perspective of sensemaking, the sense-making process begins with enactment, defined as 'action that produces the raw materials that can then be made sensible' (Weick, 1969, p.133). Central to enactment is the activity of bracketing of contextual cues or creating an initial sense of the interrupted situation, through extracting cues. Weick's classic studies view sensemaking as an information-processing activity located in the mind: People extract cues from the continuous flow of activities or events and assign them with mental schemes resulting from past experiences (Weick, 1969, 1995). Following enactment, selection occurs and refers to the interpretation process in which individuals attach meanings to actions by constructing plausible accounts (Weick, 1995) that explain current accounts of enactment as each individual interprets reality from their own perspective. The constructivist-discursive perspective of sensemaking also proposes that sensemaking occurs through 'language, talk and communication' (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). From this perspective, the search for a better explanation is focused on an individual's socially dependent attempts to interpret and explain sets of cues from the environment (Bishop et al., 2020). Retention is the third stage of the

sensemaking process in which mental models are formed as depictions of a situation that are consensually valid, experience-based and experiential in nature.

There is a growing body of scholarship that has examined the sensemaking frameworks of a diverse range of entrepreneurs, such as social entrepreneurs (Drencheva et al., 2023), high technology entrepreneurs (McAdam and Marlow, 2011) and family businesses (Jones and Li, 2017). Most of the research on entrepreneurial sensemaking focuses on sensemaking in the context of various types of crises as a dynamic, socially embedded action undertaken to reduce uncertainty, be they financial (Hollerer et al., 2018) or business failure (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). Within the management literature, the pandemic epitomises a type of constrained context that triggers sensemaking due to its unforeseen and unexpected nature, distributed and competing information sources (Christianson and Barton, 2020) that resulted in difficulties for individuals to generate shared understandings to coordinate action (Rubin and de Vries, 2020). Markham et al. (2021) conducted an autoethnographic study to understand the implications of the pandemic in everyday lives at macro levels. These studies from the management field help us understand that when individuals are trying to make sense of an event, they are also engaged in making sense of its impact on their experience of everyday work and life. Yet, empirical studies have not explored the processes involved in sensemaking at the intersection of gender, digital technologies and entrepreneurship interpellated through postfeminism and contextualised by the pandemic.

Methods

Research ontology

In this study, we leverage feminist poststructuralism as an ontology and epistemology (Baxter, 2016) and discourse analysis as a methodology (Cheek, 2000) to address our research question. Rejecting universal truths and binaries, a poststructural perspective seeks to deconstruct essentialising group categories to expose the heterogeneous, specific experiences of individuals and living as multiple unfixed realities (Weedon, 1997). Embedded within discourses of postmodernity poststructural theorising helps make visible the constitutive force of discourses and their relations with subjectivity (Braidotti, 2019). Within this ontology, a feminist poststructuralist approach incorporates an analysis of gender and patriarchal structures to expose social mechanisms, power relations and discourses that contribute to the marginalisation and oppression of women (Fairclough, 1993). Feminist poststructuralism combines the emancipatory and transformative goals of feminism with the deconstructive and relativist approach of poststructuralism (Cheek, 2000). It offers a means of addressing the complex experiences of women, whilst maintaining a certain degree of scepticism and guarding against generalising theories that may inadvertently subjugate those that research intends to liberate (Weedon, 1997). In so doing, it represents a strand of poststructuralism that is compatible with the politically oriented goals of postfeminism (Gill et al., 2017) and includes concepts such as language, discourse, subjectivity, agency and knowledge production. Within poststructuralism, discourse is conceived as a set of beliefs and understandings, reinforced through daily practices, which frame a particular understanding of the ways we are in the world (Fairclough, 1993). Conceived under poststructuralism, people are subjects of cultural narratives or storylines (Aston, 2016). Poststructural feminists oppose critical/feminist pedagogy's notion of empowerment which is largely influenced by Foucault's analysis of power (McNay, 1991). Agency, as conceived by feminist poststructural theorists, is linked to the process of subjectification and involves a tension between speaking the self into different subject positions, whilst simultaneously 'being subjected to the meanings inherent in the discourses through which one becomes subject' (Ruitenberg, 2018, p. 701). By troubling the limits of knowledge, feminist poststructural research makes knowledge and its production the problem of inquiry.

Qualitative procedures for sampling

Purposive sampling is used whereby the researchers make subjective judgements regarding the most suitable participants for providing the data required to address the research question (Palinkas et al., 2013). Therefore, we adhered to the following criteria to select participants – to identify a sample of women digital founder-entrepreneurs across a variety of sectors who had founded a business on their own during the pandemic, left employment and were responsible for an online business completely reliant on digital technology and had been operating for a minimum of 1 year. We sent out a call for participation on LinkedIn, Twitter and Instagram and contacted those interested account holders via direct messaging to request their participation. We also used a snowball sampling technique in which eligible and non-eligible participants shared the opportunity to participate or encouraged others to participate who met the sample criteria (Malterud et al., 2016). We sent an email invite to the women who expressed an interest in participating in the study, and 32 agreed to participate. Two participants had established a business for less than 1 year, whilst two had a prior business, and these were excluded from the sample. Whilst this method of study recruitment is expedient, it can also result in a homogeneous sample if there is a lack of diversity in the researcher's social network. This was the case in this study, as the women interviewed were all white, educated professionals; this is noted as a limitation and acknowledged in the discussion of the findings. An overview of the 28 women digital founder-entrepreneurs included in this study is detailed in Table 1.

Data collection

Recognising that we are guided by feminist poststructural epistemology, we draw on 28 in-depth interviews that delve into women's perspectives and experiences. Data was collected from January–August 2022. In the collection of our interview data, we utilise in-depth semi-structured interviews to collect the women's stories about their experiences. The interview aligns with a participant-centred approach to research and practice (Silverman, 2020), which places the women being studied at the heart of the study process, and privileges the meanings they assign to their own stories. The interviews were conducted virtually using MS Teams and/or Zoom and lasted approximately 90 minutes each, and they were recorded and transcribed verbatim. After covering some basic demographic and introductory questions during the interview, we asked participants to talk through their decision to, and experience of, becoming a digital entrepreneur during the pandemic, and to discuss the individual and social factors that affected their experience. In this way, the recorded interviews collected accounts of unfolding experiences of sensemaking around a particular event of COVID-19. We incorporated insights from the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954), where we asked individuals to reflect on the specifics of their decision. The critical incident technique is particularly appropriate when asking participants to recall and detail a time when a behaviour, action or occurrence were influenced (either positively or negatively) by a specific outcome, activity or task (Butterfield et al., 2005). This is important in attending to the risk of retrospective reconstruction (Gehman et al., 2018). We asked interviewees to focus on the period of January to March 2020, when most of Europe began to close its borders and deny entry to citizens from various countries. We allowed participants to share anything they believed was relevant to their experience(s), and this functioned as a way of collaboratively co-creating knowledge (Devault, 1990). Although we purposefully included these strategies to parallel a feminist poststructuralist approach to research, it is important to acknowledge the research relationship as inherently hierarchical (England, 1994). Although the authors could not completely dissolve this issue through reflexivity, they could enhance our awareness of asymmetric relationships by exposing their own

Table 1. Participants.

Name	Age bracket	Status	Location	Education and qualifications	Career background	Characteristics of digital self-entrep-ri- (extreme category of digital entrepreneurship)	Duration of being a digital entrepreneur (years)
Susan	40–45	Married and 3 children	Belgium	Bachelor's degree and master's in economics	English and Spanish Teacher; Recruitment Specialist	Digital business providing HR consultancy services	January 2020–present
Fiona	40–45	Divorced and 3 children	Belgium	Bachelor's degree in languages	HR Generalist	Digital platform creator for online training provision to women	January 2020–present
Elizabeth	35–40	Married and 3 children	Northern Ireland	Bachelor's degree in sociology	Social Worker	Health and well-being app creator and online training provider	October 2020–present
Tanya	40–45	Partner and 3 children	Belgium	Bachelor's degree in Spanish and sociology	English Teacher	Digital training app creator	May 2020–present
Nicola	40–45	Married and 2 children	Northern Ireland	Bachelor's degree in science	Banking professional	Financial app creator	February 2020–present
Diane	35–40	Married	Northern Ireland	Bachelor's degree in product design	Product designer across a range of industries	Digital app creator for product design	October 2020–present
Jane	40–45	Married and 3 children	Northern Ireland	Bachelor's degree in hospitality and tourism management; Qualified chartered accountant	Accountant in the tourism industry	Accountancy digital app creator	January 2020–present
Kate	40–45	Married and 2 children	Northern Ireland	Bachelor's degree in law	Department of health advisor	Digital health app creator	January 2020–present
Denise	40–45	Married and 2 children	Ireland	Bachelor's degree in microbiology; MSc pharmaceutical and regulatory affairs	Pharmaceutical consultant	Digital financial wellness product	January 2020 present
Stephanie	40–45	Married and 3 children	Ireland	Bachelor's degree in theatre studies; Bachelor's degree of science in physiotherapy	Physiotherapist	Care-enabling digital platform for hospitals and clinics	January 2020–present
Deirdre	20–25	Partner	Northern Ireland	Bachelor's degree in occupational therapy	Retail executive	Digital safety app creator	May 2020–present
Majella	35–40	Married and 2 children	Northern Ireland	Chartered marketing diploma	Youth worker	Digital business – digital product creation and digital training service	January 2020–present
Lindsey	40–45	Married and 3 children	United Kingdom	Bachelor's degree in law	Executive legal PA	Digital business – service is delivered digitally	April 2020–present
Alison	40–45	Married and 1 child	Northern Ireland	Bachelor's degree in sociology	Marketing executive	Digital marketing business	May 2020–present
Chloe	40–45	Partner	United Kingdom	Bachelor's degree in modern language and literature	Writer	Global digital platform creator	January 2020–present
Laura	50–55	Married and 4 children	Ireland	Digital marketing diploma; Train the trainer qualification	Project and event manager	Digital business-online coaching and website design and management	September 2020–present
Rose	30–35	Married and 3 children	United Kingdom	Secondary School Level	Part-time employment (call centre worker)	Digital marketing business	August 2020–present
Jessica	30–35	Partner	United Kingdom	Bachelor's degree in acting	Actor	Digital coaching business	May 2020–present
Bridget	35–40	Married and 3 children	Northern Ireland	Bachelor's degree in occupational therapy	Occupational therapist	Digital marketing business –podcast creator	May 2020–present
Elaine	30–35	Married	Northern Ireland	Bachelor's degree in business studies	Freelance marketer	Digital marketing business	September 2020–present
Marie	50–55	Married and 2 children	Ireland	Bachelor's degree in pharmacy	Pharmacist	Digital healthcare service business	January 2020–present
Matilda	40–45	Married and 2 children	Ireland	Bachelor's and master's in urban planning and architecture	IT Consultant	Process automation platform creator; Application developer	November 2020–present
Mairead	50–55	Divorced and 2 children	Northern Ireland	Secondary school education	Administrative Worker	Social media digital business	May 2020–present
Ruby	50–55	Divorced and 2 children	Northern Ireland	Bachelor's degree in education	Manager in educational institution	Academic app creator	April 2020–present
Pauline	35–40	Married and 3 children	United Kingdom	Bachelor's degree in biomedical science; MBA	Pharmacist	Digital product creator; playbooks; webinars; Co-Founder of a Global Digital Community	January 2020–present
Harriet	45–50	Married and 1 child	Northern Ireland	Diploma in leadership and management	Banking professional	Digital health and well-being app creator	January 2020–present
Lucy	25–30	Partner and 1 child	United Kingdom	Bachelor's degree in film, television and radio	Media professional	Digital health app creator	April 2020–present
Kim	35–40	Married and 2 children	United Kingdom	Bachelor's degree in Spanish and French	Marketing executive	Digital marketing business	April 2020–present

partiality, perspectives and positioning. As such, the authors entered each interview, treating it as a place in which they were the learners and the participants experts in their own experiences (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007).

Trustworthiness

We ensured the trustworthiness of the analysis process through regular ongoing consultation with the research team. In relation to procedural rigour, we ensured precise data collection through complete audio-recorded data as well as discourse analysis as a reflective component to reduce misinterpretation or personal bias (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). We ensured dependability by detailing the procedures and rationale for decisions regarding analysis and exclusion or inclusion criteria (Harley and Cornelissen, 2022).

Data analysis

Poststructuralism understands interview talk as located within discourses that make both speech and speaker possible (Bonham and Bacchi, 2017). Thus, we utilise Weedon's (1997: 118) conceptualisation of discourse as 'systems of text, concepts, beliefs, and signs that exist in written and oral form and in the social practices of everyday life' whilst discourse practices refer 'to the ways in which a discourse is practiced and circulated within a culture'. The issue of theoretical incommensurability involving data reduction through a strict focus on words is problematic for post-structuralist researchers who understand that words make, rather than reflect, reality (Tassabehji et al., 2021). This is overcome by an approach to data analysis that is built on the assumption that the organisational world is socially constructed (Gioia et al., 2013). We adapted Gioia et al.'s (2013) three-stage process of data analysis, deviating from its theoretical assumptions, but retaining its structure. Stage 1 identifies first-order concepts, and relates to the identification of our object of study to draw on theoretical tenets from Gill's (2017) concept of postfeminism as a sensibility to critically examine how the agentic potential of digital entrepreneurship is discursively constituted in the pandemic by middle-class women from the Global North. In the initial data-analysis stage, we familiarised ourselves with the data, analysing transcripts individually and identifying broad themes in the form of open coding to form first-order concepts, which are either simple descriptive phrases summarising the relevant phenomena or local terms used by the informants. Stage 2 traditionally involves deriving themes from concepts through reducing first-order concepts to second-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013). At this stage, the process moves from summarising to analysis, or from informant-centric to researcher-centric. In Gioia et al.'s (2013) terms, this involves exploring spaces between boxes to allow leaps from concepts to themes or (for us) discourses. What distinguishes discourse analysis from Gioia's perspective is the analysis of statements to identify normative frameworks and the discourses within which they are located. In the second stage, we engaged axial coding to group similar open codes into clusters, adjust labels and return to the data to verify and/or alter the labels until we settle on theoretically abstracted categories. This abstraction from the open codes required labels that reflected the movement towards more theory-based terms. These are informed by literature on the crisis (Christianson and Barton, 2020; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010) as well as Gill's (2007; 2017) postfeminist sensibility, which was part of the iterative process of cycling through the data, emerging themes and categories. Where Gioia et al. (2013) adopt the resultant second-order concepts, refine and consolidate them into aggregate (theoretical) dimensions, stage 3 for us involved in exploring the constitutive discursive practices. Following Lewis and Benschop's (2023) research on women leaders using the analytical concept of postfeminism, we argue that

discursive practices can have an empowering effect in a subject position such as digital entrepreneur. An overview of our data analysis can be found in Table 2.

Findings

In this findings section, we draw upon our data to illustrate the agentic postfeminist sensemaking practices our participants adopted. In presenting the findings, we include excerpts from interviews, which illustrate the three discursive practices, resonating across the data set. Referred to by Pratt (2009) as power quotes, these extracts of data are used to illuminate our argument.

Choosing digital entrepreneurship from home as a choice

Balancing Digital Entrepreneurial Pursuits with Family Priorities. Amidst their stories of transitioning to digital entrepreneurship, participants acknowledged the silver linings stemming from the lockdown period of the pandemic which promoted a revision of their careers in employment underpinned by the accessibility of technology. Participants indicated the dynamics of enacting the decision as being supported from a digital technology perspective with Harriet noting how collaboration and building professional connections were afforded by digital tools: *'Digital technologies are fantastic for connecting with somebody and saying listen, how can I get over there, how can I get into the right places, how can I get more support for this idea'*. Chloe equally explained: *'I connect through LinkedIn or through online events using Zoom or Teams and all these platforms for digital communication. So, it's very much, about the accessibility of digital communication tools'*. Elaine voiced digital communication tools to enable revenue generation in a crisis: *'Being able to embrace technology was critical as it enabled me to build relationships with clients'*. Denise articulated the pandemic as an emotional and transformative period in her life where she identified what was important to her in terms of her health and valuing time with her children. Corah proffered revising the meaning of career success as involving time with family: *'I am much happier doing this, and I am helping more people, and that is my goal, and I am still able to walk into the kitchen and have dinner with the kids'*. Tanya also shared: *'It was actually lovely to see how we bonded as a family'*. Marie similarly added that Covid ushered in a slower pace of life, which was characterised by meaningful conversations with family and time to reflect on her love of education and building a digital platform for disseminating knowledge: *'I got to spend time with my family, what's going on in their own personal lives, their hopes, and fears whilst before Covid we were all just so busy'*. She expressed a sense of feeling *'lucky to spend a huge portion of time with family and ensure that they were happy, healthy, and safe which gave me headspace to concentrate on working on a digital education platform'*.

Perceiving a Decision Imbued with Precarity, Uncertainty and Doubt. In contrast to their joy in relation to choice and sentiments of freedom to create a new career from home, these women constructed the reactions of some families as chagrin and almost disappointment with their decision to leave employment. Denise recalled that when she approached her family and friends with enthusiasm and pride about starting a digital business, they commented that they were very negative. Participants felt caught between expectations for freedom and time out of employment and associated stresses and the feeling of insecurity in their state of knowledge of the worsening pandemic situation. Financial strain emerged in relation to the lack of clarity about the duration of the pandemic: *'My workload changed quite a bit within those first couple of months of Covid-19. I would have done a lot of face-to-face training, a lot of in-person events and consultancy before Covid-19. It all came to a halt overnight'* (Alison).

Table 2. Data Structure.

First-order codes (language from participants)	Second-order codes (Postfeminist discourses)	Aggregate theoretical dimensions (Postfeminist sensemaking practices)
<p>I was excited about starting a business and learning all things digital' (Jane)</p> <p>'It was both exhilarating and exhausting and there was fear and excitement I suppose. Being at home was a big positive that I grew to love' (Nicola)</p> <p>'It was easy to access information online and there are so many webinars available and the time at home gave me space to reflect on what I wanted to achieve in life and family was a focus point' (Tanya)</p> <p>'I guess I really wanted to be successful for my children in a way that I was also there for them at home' (Fiona)</p> <p>'I missed out on so many years due to long working hours and was excited to work from home with my new venture although I was also scared of making such as huge leap' (Kate)</p> <p>'I had a mix of emotions and didn't know what to expect although I knew what I didn't want my life to be after experiencing burnout and illness due to over-work and Covid made me rethink my health and values' (Mairiada)</p> <p>'My goal was to protect my children from this virus whilst also realising they depended on me to be secure, and I needed an income' (Kim)</p> <p>'The world around us went crazy and I kept our home calm whilst feeling like I was going to explode with worry and fear... fear of falling with my business and fear and not bringing in enough income to match what I had pre Covid' (Ruby)</p> <p>'I doubted myself so much in the early days and there was no template to follow... it wasn't a nice time' (Marie)</p> <p>'I had no safety net and the way my job came abruptly to a halt, and I decided to never look back... but I did at times reflect and knew I had no choice but to keep going and make it work' (Lucy)</p> <p>'I found that family and friends were a bit sceptical of my ideas and launching a business was regarded by some as madness' (Majella)</p> <p>'My life was difficult in parts... I suffered several miscarriages and nearly gave up on myself. The work was not satisfying as there was so much bureaucracy' (Stephanie)</p> <p>'I had two pregnancies and each time I came back to work felt that I was penalised for time away' (Majella)</p> <p>'It killed me for years leaving home at 6am and not returning home until 8 or 9 sometimes just to look busy or satisfy the boss. I felt a useless mummy' (Rose)</p> <p>'My employer made me work every hour and I missed time with my children, and it destroyed the relationship with my husband' (Fiona)</p> <p>'My daughter was diagnosed with cancer, and this was life changing for me. We suffered as a family, and I guess this made me stronger and gave me resilience when Covid arrived although this added extra worry' (Alison)</p> <p>'My work was monotonous and with long hours, and I often wondered what I am doing in my life. My children were in childcare from a very young age, and I missed out on so many important milestones... for what I still ask myself especially after caring for my ill father' (Elizabeth)</p> <p>'I have always been driven and work hard and this continued with setting up a digital business. You can only fail if you don't apply yourself' (Elizabeth)</p> <p>'I looked up webinars and taught myself about the technology although this was all consuming and still is to be honest' (Nicola)</p> <p>'I realised I needed to upgrade my digital skills and only I could do this, so I spent so much time online and doing searches and finding expert opinions on my product' (Jane)</p> <p>'It was a whole life change, and I needed to revise the way I was thinking and put in the hours' (Kate)</p> <p>'After all I had been through in my life and surviving, being positive and getting up and getting the digital business off the ground was easy' (Tanya)</p> <p>'It was my job to look after the family and run the business' (Nicole)</p> <p>'I have always done the children's breakfasts, lunches, dinners and homework and I still do this although I am home more' (Tanya)</p> <p>'My family and business are important to me, and I need both to be fulfilled' (Jane)</p> <p>'My husband doesn't see the laundry or housework and that is the way it has always been and despite us both home over Covid, his work was more important, and I always worked at night when the children were in bed' (Jane)</p> <p>'I felt overwhelmed and anxious at times when I couldn't sleep as the digital world and online never stops but I am taking control of this with careful boundaries' (Tanya)</p> <p>'You can always be switched on, but you learn quite quickly that it will destroy you and you need to prioritise yourself and your family time' (Jane)</p> <p>'You realise that you never know enough but can be strategic and form the right networks and interact with the right people' (Kate)</p> <p>'Social connections are key to get on and reduce the burden of learning, but these take time to build' (Nicola)</p>	<p>Balancing Digital Entrepreneurial Pursuits with Family Priorities</p> <p>Perceiving a Decision Imbued with Precarity, Uncertainty and Doubt</p> <p>Drawing on Memories of being in a Disempowered Gendered Position</p> <p>Construing Empowerment Discourses</p> <p>Accepting the Individualised Burden of Mothering</p> <p>Contesting the Individualised Burden of Mothering</p>	<p>Choosing Digital Entrepreneurship from Home as a Choice</p> <p>(De)constructing Selves</p> <p>Complying and Resisting the Burden of the Status Quo</p>

All our participants were employed before the pandemic and expressed ambivalence around simultaneous feelings of happiness at *'slowing down'* and *'embarking on a new career'* (Lucy) and feelings of discomfort at leaving a stable career in crisis conditions. For instance, Denise referred to being: *'free although weighed down'*. She elaborated on her experience of leaving a secure big-income career in the pharmaceutical industry: *'I had just thrown my career away. You have got the burden of all the income, and I had a lead weight around my neck'*. Susan voiced individual responsibility for infection with the virus and guilt about enjoying setting up a digital business: *'There was a lot of the pressure on in the pandemic thinking that it's our fault. If you walk outside, you will contaminate people whilst I was happy being indoors working on setting up channels for my digital services'*.

(De)constructing Selves

Drawing on Memories of being in a Disempowered Gendered Position. Our participants were both drawn to and repelled by the crafting of their identities as wives, mothers, and workers. Their former worker subjectivities receded into the background as they became a digital entrepreneur. Whilst all participants said that they were looking forward to shedding their employment identity imbued with pressure, burnout and lack of consideration for family values, they also remarked about the noticeable transition that occurs internally around one's sense of worth as a digital entrepreneur and the need for a resilient mindset. Women noted that they were being evaluated by others through discourses that privileged masculine orientation to entrepreneurship, and they constructed excuses for this via assuming female stereotypes whilst valuing the changes in their sense of self:

The image of a digital entrepreneur was really challenging as I wasn't a man full of ego, and I didn't sell this great product. I offered this new service on a digital platform and people (friends and family) were asking me to do tasks freely. It takes time to build the confidence to feel legitimate especially as a woman in this space. (Rose)

Mairead similarly experienced this rationalisation: *'The clients I've taken on in the beginning were friends and they recommended me which was great. But that makes it difficult for pricing and you end up underselling yourself'*. These women tried to discursively manage their entrepreneurial selves by reasserting accomplishments to ward off negative opinions and categorisations. Their dilemmas are evident as they elucidate gendered disruptions and conflicts interwoven with their employment experiences. Lucy described her decision to become independent because of a tumultuous upbringing, triggering the need to push forward and exhibit strength in character:

My Mum and Dad broke up when I was 15, so it was a turbulent time, and it was a very nasty divorce. I'd become very fiercely independent. So that independence at 15, those turbulent, horrible years made me resilient and strong and determined to succeed in whatever I did, and digital technologies were a perfect way of making a shift to set up my own business possible.

Her narrative shows that responding to anger whilst embracing forward motion was a process that was fostered in her earlier years and the strength to act occurs over the pandemic. This shift was a common thread throughout the interviews, with Majella saying:

I was on the verge of taking my life, it was a very dark time in my life. So going through that situation in my life and knowing that I came through that situation it's kind of like when Covid-19 hit, you know what, I can do this, you know, I've got the tools that I need to follow a dream and set up a digital business.

As it was, our participants referenced a master narrative of gendered vulnerability that resonated with them and helped them to reorient and feel positive about the digital entrepreneurship story they have. Participants such as Kim described taking control over their life and sustaining incremental progress to devise a new self: *'You've kind of got to just keep going ahead and pushing on and I think it's a mindset thing of just not letting yourself get bogged down by it when things don't go your way as a woman in this space'*. Pauline reflected on the difference between her working life in the pharmaceutical industry and the ideal worker image with masculine performance evaluation systems embedded in this sector. She discussed how she felt she couldn't progress in her career due to taking maternity leave three times, which she felt penalised for: *'That inner strength and finding a solution and in every single problem there is a positive, there is an opportunity which I learned when I was employed in a male dominated workplace and met adversity'*. Pauline added *'I turned what I thought was going to be our darkest days into a thriving online business'*. Kate discussed the illness of her daughter as helping her recognise the gap in the health system and dissatisfactory working environment whilst providing mental tools needed to promote positive action, saying: *'The reason I ended up leaving my job was because my daughter had got her diagnosis. Because I had had that experience with my daughter which was incredibly tough and there was much grief with little support from my employer, I decided to do something when Covid-19 hit'*.

Construing Empowerment Discourses. The idea that the pandemic presented an opportunity to construct and deconstruct parts of themselves based on their experiences of gender disruptions and conflicts was considered something that our participants needed to be and were motivated to do: *'I think as a woman you become strong and must depend on yourself and mould yourself to fit new environments and new requirements. I wanted a change in career, and I have given everything to make it happen'* (Stephanie). There is, however, a constant tension in this process: participants appeared to project a positive outlook whilst working on their digital businesses under strain, as Laura's narrative shows:

You must be positive and understand that you are there to solve client's problems and must look like you are in control and must be available when they need you. This can be challenging at times but at the end of the day your competitor is a call away.

In the context of the pandemic, participants expressed that for success it was necessary to invest in digital literacy training, which was continuous and open-ended due to the rapid obsolescence of technology. The development of digital literacy was critical for participants to ensure the survival and agility of the business. For example, Jane elaborates:

In addition to the use of the Internet, social media, and downloadable apps I used the web to glean innovative approaches for facilitating financial transactions electronically, building, and mining databases, and using software to accomplish business activities such as keeping records and accounts and managing payroll.

At the same time, remote work required women to invent ways to connect with existing and new customers using digital platforms. Bridget indicated that she acquired knowledge from an online mentor, a strategic strategy that was adopted by all participants:

She met me for an hour, and she said stop complaining, you haven't done a video, a live video on social media, you've never done a giveaway on social media, you've never collaborated with another digital entrepreneur, all the things that I now know are the key things for growth.

Accepting the Individualised Burden of Mothering. Participants reflect on the beginning of March 2020 when social distancing measures were being adhered to by most countries with borders closed and recommendations to self-isolate at home and avoid close contact were spread across institutions, media, and the public discourse. Such measures obliged women who had families in our study to combine setting up a digital business with taking care of, and home-schooling, their children – as they rarely mentioned their partners in this care process. For Bridget who had a baby early in COVID-19, she believed she should be focused on childbirth, her well-being, and her baby's well-being, but felt compelled to always make career progress. She explains: *'I was worrying about my business and planning my digital business and how to set things up in the hospital'*. Jane underlines this:

I probably could have or should have been a lot harder on myself, certainly from a home-schooling perspective but it was survival . . . my husband was going into the office because he was saying that he couldn't work from home. I was trying to home school the three of them and it just wasn't possible.

These problems about time and agency are not considered to be structural inequalities, but as the narratives show, our participants' individual problems to solve and continue solving. A complex example emerged when women recognised their material constraints and identified the individualised gendered neoliberal discourses that constrained their personal agency with Kim observing the cultural ideologies surrounding parents and families generated anticipatory judgement:

This reality became very apparent before and during Covid around caring and societal norms. It wasn't a responsibility that my husband carried. I have been left with juggling a digital business and raising my children. I'm expected to be childcare all the time. I must work the weekends, if I want to have the week off or a couple of days off, I must work the weekend beforehand so that I have done all my client work so that I can justify having that time off with them.

Contesting the Individualised Burden of Mothering through Social Connections. In their retrospective reconstructions of their experiences, participants operated within discourses filled with ongoing sensemaking and shifting subjectivities. In this regard, we found that participants struggled with ideal and lived representations of women as mothers and digital entrepreneurs, which brought societal, institutional discursive and material structures to bear on their experience of digital entrepreneurship. Indeed, Matilda expressed: *'I found it hard to separate my home and work life and trying to be the perfect mum and wife and run a successful digital business is tough'*. Ironically, whilst acknowledging the social order she (re)constructed having it all discourse. Matilda feels a strong sense that both the problem and its solution are in her hands; she needs to be self-reliant to resolve this tension (rather than seeking recourse in social systems) and she expresses her continuing attempts to make sense of her reality. All participants expressed that their motivation to leave their employment situations was imbued with a desire to leave environments containing flawed working conditions and logic, but they found themselves in digital entrepreneurship spaces where work was perceived as less important to their maternal selves as reflected in Rose's narrative:

I started this digital business to have freedom to be with my family and generate an income doing what I find interesting. The long hours didn't bother me as much when I started, and I suppose it does really bother me now because I am always working or can be and miss my children.

Although Rose's speech connotes resignation, she highlights that she tries to *'put boundaries in place to protect my health and have down time'*. Another participant still clings to the idea of being free but realises that she has not taken time away from the business since it started *'because there never is a good time to'* (Nicola). She suggests that she is planning to take a break which she underlines as her right to do and will inform her clients. She emphasises the need *'to put holiday time in your diary so that you can't not take it'*. Tanya advocates active resistance against an incessant culture of being online and replying to queries at all hours. She does so *'by being rigid in the switch-off times with all phones and laptops'*. She also comments on the competitive nature of the industry she is in with new technologies becoming available every day which she navigates by joining an online network to share ideas and keep knowledge about trends. In this regard, women in our study talk about fostering strategic social connections through digital technologies for opportunity creation and creating a collaborative space for women in digital business. Belonging to a community or other meaningful social groups provides participants with a sense of continuity, safety, affirmation and mattering. When women encountered obstacles that they could not tackle on their own, they also turned to their online community for advice.

Discussion

In this article, we explore the question: How is the agentic potential of digital entrepreneurship discursively constituted in the pandemic by women? This is addressed by drawing on theoretical tenets from postfeminism and crisis sensemaking literature then illustrated by an empirical study exploring the postfeminist sensemaking underpinning women's digital entrepreneurs' agency and related becoming subjectivities. By this means, we reconceptualise women's experiences at the intersection of digital technologies and entrepreneurial sensemaking in the pandemic crisis countering scholarship which offers a meso-level gender-neutral lens for understanding how digital entrepreneurs navigate the conditions of austerity and crisis germane to the pandemic (Khurana et al., 2022; Troise et al., 2022). In this regard, we make a trifold contribution.

First, we extend extant work on crisis sensemaking (Christianson and Barton, 2020; Rubin and de Vries, 2020) by uncovering the postfeminist sensemaking idiosyncrasies of women digital entrepreneur's agency. The findings indicate that digital spaces emerge as a postfeminist gender regime in which there are opportunities for and against women's access to and participation in entrepreneurship and for their career aspirations to be realised. The analysis indicates that women's discourses of becoming a digital entrepreneur are replete with gendered tensions in relation to natural sexual difference, shifting subjectivities of empowerment and disempowerment, and discourses of othering as well as complicity in accepting the status quo as they navigate among dominant conceptualisations of their nature and social roles in the pandemic. Research participants negotiated agency through a postfeminist sensemaking trajectory: From initial reactions, emotions and expectations of being a woman and leaving employment to become a digital entrepreneur; through participant's struggles to construct productive empowering selves as a woman digital entrepreneur; to their sensemaking of complying and resisting the burden of accepting the status quo in the aftermath of the decision. In other words, we show how they transform, through action, an initial decision to become a digital entrepreneur that was rapid, dynamic and complex into a publicly displayed simpler ordered sense (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010), through a postfeminist sensibility. Hence, a key contribution of this article is to theoretically connect the concept of postfeminist sensibility (Gill et al., 2017) to the classic conception of crisis sensemaking (Weick, 1988). This is in accordance with recent assertions that postfeminism has theoretical scope beyond popular media representations (Gill, 2017), organisation studies (Ahl and Marlow, 2021) and entrepreneurship (Lewis et al., 2022). We enrich recent research (Christianson and Barton, 2020) and

early theorising (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010) on how sensemaking explains crisis responses and outcomes in women's digital entrepreneurship by considering the formation of postfeminist discourses that compress the crisis into a personal understanding of the sensemaking that produces agency. There is a growing body of scholarship that has empirically examined the sensemaking frameworks of a diverse range of entrepreneurs (Jones and Li, 2017; Kaffka et al., 2021; McAdam and Marlow, 2011), with an understanding of the entrepreneurship phenomenon as a dynamic social process (Moroz and Hindle, 2012) that is at the centre of recent research calls. This includes understanding the particularities of contexts such as digital spaces (Stephens and Miller, 2024). We extend this discussion by drawing novel conceptual distinctions that show how women enact a decision to become entrepreneurs in the digital space during the pandemic. Sensemaking is concerned with how personal histories and experiences mediate the ways in which individuals make sense of the world (Weick et al., 2005); we explicate this process by shedding light on the postfeminist dialectics of sensemaking by women digital entrepreneurs. In so doing, we contribute to the call to shift towards an understanding of sensemaking that is sensitive to time and space (Steigenberger and Lübcke, 2022), and attention to how space and time interrelate in entrepreneurship (Levesque and Stephan, 2020) by describing how women enact a decision to become an entrepreneur in a digital context within the temporal framing of the pandemic.

Second, we make an empirical contribution to the small but growing body of research in the gender and digital entrepreneurship field (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Elias and Gill, 2018; Pritchard et al., 2019) that draws on the concept of postfeminism as a critical analytic lens. We do so by shedding light on sensemaking-in-action via our empirical data and contribute a better understanding of how the experiences of women interact with broader postfeminist patterns of gendered beliefs and expectations. We find that women become digital entrepreneurs in the pandemic by mobilising a crisis induced entrepreneurial sensemaking postfeminist trajectory. Thus, we respond to recent calls to explore the social and cultural nuances of the postfeminist landscape (Keisu and Brodin, 2022), and to the developing body of scholarship on postfeminism within the digital entrepreneurship and gender field (Duffy and Hund, 2015) by tracing how postfeminist sensibility is received and negotiated on a subjective level by women digital entrepreneurs. This is important as we need to further investigate these newly emerging inequality mechanisms (Özkazanç-Pan and Pullen, 2020), and the way they work on construction of women as subjects under gendered neoliberalism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). We also address the empirical deficit of women's digital entrepreneurship in the pandemic as a form of everyday entrepreneurship (Welter et al., 2019) within under-reached constrained contexts (Refai et al., 2024) such as the pandemic. Whilst a central tenet of organisational and entrepreneurship scholarship adopts a pathogenic perspective of how the crisis challenged women's entrepreneurship (Alon et al., 2020), a smaller body of literature suggests a more salutogenic view (Manolova et al., 2020). In our study, we empirically show this dialectic as women realised the potential of digital technologies and their experiences through a postfeminist demonstration of an ability to withstand systematic discontinuities as well as the capability to adapt to disruptions proactively and continually. Thus, we contribute to empirical knowledge of women's participation in digital entrepreneurship in a crisis context, extending nascent work in women's digital entrepreneurship (Vershina et al., 2022; Wiig et al., 2024). Furthermore, by disentangling the crisis conditions and postfeminist gender regime that creates a scaffold for starting and managing a digital business, we forward a more critical understanding of the agentic potential of digital technologies for women's participation, which follows critical cyberfeminism (Heizmann and Liu, 2022; Kelly and McAdam, 2022, 2023).

A third related contribution is methodological through a poststructuralist feminist inquiry of the career backgrounds, perceptions and experiences of women digital entrepreneurs through the pandemic crisis to unpack their postfeminist sensemaking narratives. Through this contextualised

view of agency at the nexus between the social conditions produced by the crisis and a critical gendered lens on the digital entrepreneurial opportunities it affords, our study provides a methodological framework for extending context discussions in entrepreneurship research to involve an environmental exogenous shock. By using feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis, we find that women engage in three postfeminist discursive sensemaking practices: (1) Choosing digital entrepreneurship from home as a career, (2) (De)constructing selves and (3) complying and resisting the burden of the status quo. Hence, we contribute to recent calls to draw on feminist poststructuralism that pays specific attention to gender, subjectivity and entrepreneurship (Benschop and Lewis, 2024) and broader interdisciplinary calls for post-qualitative inquiry in a turbulent global environment (Pierre, 2011).

Limitations and future research

We acknowledge the limitations of our work as well as the potential for future research. Our research relies on retrospective interviews conducted after the pandemic, which is appropriate for sensemaking studies where retrospective interviews are common (Weiser, 2021). We acknowledge that the sensemaking discourses of our participants are constructed retrospectively, and therefore subject to the benefit as well as bias of hindsight (Mueller, 2019). To address the risk of retrospective reconstruction (Gehman et al., 2018), we draw on the critical incident technique, which is appropriate when asking participants to recall and detail a time when a behaviour, action or occurrence affected a specific outcome, activity or task (Butterfield et al., 2005). We focus on women digital entrepreneurs who had founded a digital business amidst the pandemic and survived the crisis because the classic concept of crisis sensemaking is based on the survivability of organisations from external shocks. The pandemic was chosen as a case crisis for the research because of its nature as a business challenge, its influence on the changing contours of organisations and entrepreneurship, and its amplification of digital entrepreneurship. This is an important endeavour for entrepreneurial and management scholars as we are in a period of overlapping crises (Rauch and Hulsink, 2023), and strength of our research lies in the qualitative nature resulting in an exploration of the career experiences of an elite group of women digital entrepreneurs using tenets of postfeminism and sensemaking contextualised by an extreme crisis. Our sample size served our research interest and is in line with the need for more contextualised research on the lived sensemaking experiences of women digital entrepreneurs. Thus, our intention was not to gather large-scale quantitative data, but to generate rich qualitative insights and accounts (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019). We identify this sample as a potential strength of our work in embracing diversity rather than the homogeneity of women digital entrepreneurs, as well as answering calls for research on digital entrepreneurship from the perspective of women (Kelly and McAdam, 2023). We also acknowledge the limitations of using a small sample and argue that our findings should be corroborated in settings exposed to global crises, such as developing countries or with other types of entrepreneurs, such as minority entrepreneurs. Future research could investigate the sensemaking processes of women of colour, LGBTQIA and intersections occurring with race and disability using an intersectionality perspective (Crenshaw, 1991). In addition, a longitudinal study in this aspect would deepen the understanding of sensemaking processes, involving spatial-temporal interactions (Steigenberger and Lübcke, 2022) and embodied ethnographic approaches (De Rond et al., 2019) to generate rich discursive interactions from which to extrapolate women sensemaking.

Conclusion

In this article, by drawing on sensemaking theory and postfeminism we proffer a poststructural feminist theory and method of socially disruptive crisis events as it relates to the agentic responses

of women entrepreneurs in digital spaces. The study relies on a feminist poststructuralist investigation of 28 women digital entrepreneurs in the pandemic context to develop an analytical framework that utilises discourse analysis and the conceptualisation of a postfeminist sensibility in women's digital entrepreneurship. The research shows how women mobilise elements of postfeminism within an unfolding sensemaking process through discursive practices for coping with the false promise of gender egalitarianism in digital entrepreneurship.


Data availability statement

The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions. Specifically, informed consent assured participants that the data would be kept on a secure, password-protected computer. Participants did not consent to having their data shared in a public repository.

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