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Empowering Women Entrepreneurs through Digital Platforms: A Descriptive Qualitative Study on Home-Based Culinary Micro-Businesses in Sleman, Yogyakarta

St. Aulia P. Asri Utami [1*]

[1]Department Of management, Universitas Islam Indonesia, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: Asryaulia22@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement of digital platforms has emerged as a crucial catalyst for women's economic empowerment, particularly within the competitive home-based food and beverage (F&B) sector in Yogyakarta, an education and tourism hub with active digital consumption. This descriptive qualitative study explores how female culinary micro-entrepreneurs strategically utilize Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and online food delivery applications to reach diverse market segments while identifying the operational challenges they encounter. Using a small-scale case study approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with three purposively selected female home-based culinary business owners in Sleman, Yogyakarta, and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that digital platforms function as a practical equalizer: they reduce entry barriers, enable home-based ventures to compete with larger brands, strengthen household financial independence, and provide space for women's self-actualization beyond traditional domestic roles. However, the study identifies two interrelated categories of challenges. The first is structural, namely dependency on unpredictable platform algorithms, delivery-app commission systems, and intense price wars. The second is psychological and operational, especially the double burden of managing real-time content, customer chats, delivery timing, and daily kitchen work. Theoretically, this study enriches digital entrepreneurship and women's empowerment literature by contextualizing platform-based agency within home-based micro-enterprises. Practically, it proposes digital adaptation strategies and evidence-based recommendations for local stakeholders to design targeted, sustainable digital literacy programs for novice women entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Women Empowerment; Culinary Entrepreneurship; Digital Platforms; Home-Based Micro-Businesses; Yogyakarta.

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INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms increasingly shape how micro and small businesses reach consumers, organize transactions, and build brand identity. For women entrepreneurs, this shift is not merely a technical

change in marketing channels; it affects how they negotiate market participation, household responsibilities, and personal identity as business actors. In Indonesia, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) have become one of the most visible arenas of digital transformation, yet the benefits of digitalization are uneven because many small businesses still face limited resources, technical skills, and data-related risks (Purnomo et al., 2024).

Home-based culinary micro-businesses are a useful context for understanding this issue. They often start with modest capital, family labor, and a domestic production space. Before digital platforms became widespread, access to customers was usually limited to neighbors, school communities, local markets, and word-of-mouth networks. Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp Business, marketplace features, and online food delivery applications now make it possible for small kitchen-based brands to display menus, build stories, collect orders, and reach customers outside their immediate neighborhood. In this sense, digital platforms can lower entry barriers and create new entrepreneurial opportunities (Yu & Sekiguchi, 2024).

Yogyakarta is especially relevant because the region combines dense student populations, tourism activities, creative communities, and strong local food culture. Sleman, as one of its major districts, contains residential areas, campuses, boarding houses, offices, and tourist corridors. This setting creates a diverse market for affordable snacks, frozen food, home-cooked meals, cakes, desserts, and customized catering. For women who operate from home, the digital market provides a route to participate in the culinary economy without immediately renting a storefront or leaving domestic responsibilities entirely.

Recent studies in Indonesia show that women entrepreneurs use social media to sustain business activities, promote products, and reach new audiences. Rahayu et al. (2023), for example, found that women-owned SMEs in Yogyakarta relied on social media as a survival mechanism during and after the COVID-19 crisis. Rosepti and Niasari (2022) similarly show that female-led businesses can use websites, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp to expand access, increase income, and build partnerships. These studies are important, but more contextual exploration is still needed at the micro scale, especially for home-based culinary businesses that combine domestic work, food production, and real-time digital engagement.

The growth of delivery platforms also introduces new tensions. Food delivery applications expand market access and provide logistics infrastructure, yet they can create dependency on commission rules, search rankings, discount campaigns, rating systems, and algorithmic visibility. Research on platform-dependent entrepreneurship suggests that platforms simultaneously provide market entry and expose entrepreneurs to power asymmetries, dependence, and precarity (Yu & Sekiguchi, 2024). Haidar (2024) further argues that food delivery platforms organize multiple markets and exercise algorithmic and non-algorithmic control over providers, including small food establishments. These insights are highly relevant for home-based culinary entrepreneurs who are often less able to negotiate platform terms.

Based on this background, this study asks two research questions. First, how do women home-based culinary micro-entrepreneurs in Sleman use digital platforms to support business growth and empowerment? Second, what structural, operational, and psychological challenges emerge from their dependence on social media and online food delivery applications? The objective is to describe platform use as both an enabling resource and a source of new vulnerability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women Entrepreneurship and Digital Empowerment

Women entrepreneurship is often discussed through economic and social dimensions. Economically, it can contribute to income generation, household resilience, and local employment. Socially, it enables women to gain confidence, build networks, and participate in public economic life. In the context of micro-businesses, empowerment should not be reduced to sales growth alone. It also includes the owner's

ability to make decisions, manage time, negotiate family support, learn new skills, and feel recognized as a capable economic actor.

Digital platforms can strengthen these dimensions because they allow entrepreneurs to communicate directly with customers, control visual branding, and test products quickly. Olsson and Bernhard (2021) argue that women entrepreneurs often acquire digital skills through learning by doing, informal learning, and step-by-step self-development. This pattern is relevant for home-based culinary businesses where owners frequently learn content creation, menu photography, caption writing, customer service, and delivery coordination without formal training.

However, digital empowerment remains shaped by inequality. Access to smartphones and platforms does not automatically produce equal benefits. Entrepreneurs differ in confidence, time, literacy, capital, and family support. Umboh and Aryanto (2023) show that digital literacy mediates the relationship between digital marketing capability and SME performance. Therefore, platform use becomes empowering when women can understand platform features, interpret customer responses, protect themselves from misinformation, and convert online visibility into sustainable orders.

Digital Platforms for Micro-Business Adaptation

Digital transformation literature emphasizes that digital tools can improve market reach, operational efficiency, and profitability, but adoption requires readiness and capability. In Indonesia, MSMEs are still constrained by limited technical knowledge, inadequate resources, and uneven digital infrastructure (Purnomo et al., 2024). Kurniawati et al. (2021) also indicate that digital transformation among Indonesian MSMEs during the pandemic was associated with survival strategies, but it required organizational adjustment and learning.

For culinary micro-businesses, each platform provides different affordances. Instagram is useful for visual identity, menu display, testimonials, reels, and customer trust. TikTok is effective for discovery through short videos, storytelling, and trend-based content. WhatsApp supports direct ordering, repeat customers, broadcast lists, and personal communication. Online food delivery applications provide order infrastructure, payment options, courier logistics, and customer exposure within a ready-made marketplace. These platforms are not interchangeable; entrepreneurs combine them according to product type, target consumers, time capacity, and promotional objectives.

Digital platforms also encourage fast experimentation. A product can be photographed in the morning, uploaded by noon, and evaluated through likes, comments, saves, messages, and actual orders on the same day. This feedback loop is valuable for micro-entrepreneurs because it reduces the cost of market research. Nevertheless, platform metrics can become emotionally demanding because owners may interpret low views, few likes, or quiet chats as business failure even when offline orders remain stable.

Platform Dependency, Algorithms, and Food Delivery Competition

The concept of platform-dependent entrepreneurship highlights the double-edged nature of digital platforms. Platforms provide access to large markets and digital infrastructure, but they also control visibility, rules, data, and monetization systems (Yu & Sekiguchi, 2024). For small entrepreneurs, the problem is not simply whether they use platforms, but how far business continuity depends on rules that they cannot control.

In the food delivery sector, this issue becomes more concrete. Haidar (2024) explains that food delivery platforms do not merely connect restaurants and consumers; they also create marketing and gastronomy markets, monitor providers, influence prices, and reinforce asymmetries between larger and smaller food businesses. For home-based culinary ventures, these asymmetries appear through commission fees, promotional pressure, search ranking, customer ratings, delivery radius, and the expectation to join discounts. When many sellers compete through the same application, price wars can reduce margins and normalize heavy promotions.

Social media algorithms add another layer of uncertainty. Instagram and TikTok can make small brands visible quickly, but visibility is unstable because reach depends on changing algorithmic preferences, posting frequency, video format, audience behavior, and trend cycles. The same content quality may generate different results across days. This unpredictability encourages continuous posting and monitoring, which can create a psychological burden for entrepreneurs who are also cooking, packaging, buying ingredients, handling family care, and responding to customers.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative design with a small-scale case study approach. The design was selected because the research aims to understand the meanings, practices, and challenges experienced by women entrepreneurs rather than to measure causal effects statistically. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for exploring how entrepreneurs interpret digital platforms, how they make everyday decisions, and how they negotiate business and domestic responsibilities.

Participants were selected purposively based on three criteria: the business is owned and managed by a woman; production is conducted primarily from home; and the business uses at least two digital platforms for marketing, communication, or delivery. Three participants located in Sleman, Yogyakarta, were included. The number is intentionally small to allow detailed description of platform practices and to maintain the exploratory nature of the study.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide covered business background, platform use, customer acquisition, content creation, delivery-app experience, household financial contribution, decision-making, and perceived challenges. Interviews were supported by simple observation of public-facing social media accounts, menu posts, promotional activities, and delivery-app display when available. The data were analyzed thematically by identifying repeated meanings, grouping similar codes, and developing broader themes. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasize that thematic analysis requires systematic engagement with patterns of meaning rather than mechanical code counting; this principle guided the interpretation of the interview data.

To maintain confidentiality, the participants are referred to as P1, P2, and P3. The study does not use direct quotations because this paper is prepared as an early draft and the interview transcript verification process is still ongoing. Instead, the findings are presented as synthesized narratives from the interview results. Future revision can add verbatim quotes after participant approval.

Table 1. Informant Profile and Platform Use

Participant	Business Type	Main Platforms	Dominant Market Segment	Digital Use Pattern
P1	Home-made snacks and hampers	Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok	Students, young families, gift buyers	Visual catalog, reels, pre-order broadcast, seasonal promotions
P2	Rice meals and daily catering	WhatsApp, Instagram, food delivery app	Office workers, boarding-house students, neighbors	Daily menu updates, repeat-order management, courier coordination
P3	Desserts and frozen food	TikTok, Instagram, food delivery app	Youth customers, online buyers, reseller contacts	Short videos, product storytelling, discount campaigns, delivery-app exposure

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Digital Platforms as Low-Cost Market Access

The first finding shows that digital platforms function as low-cost market access for home-based culinary entrepreneurs. The participants did not need to rent a strategic storefront to display menus and communicate with customers. Instagram and TikTok allowed them to present food photos, behind-the-scenes kitchen processes, customer testimonials, packaging aesthetics, and limited-time promotions. WhatsApp remained important for closing transactions because customers felt more comfortable asking questions, requesting menu adjustments, and confirming delivery details through personal chat.

This finding supports Rosepti and Niasari (2022), who show that female-led businesses can benefit from combining public-facing platforms with WhatsApp transactions. In the Sleman cases, public platforms were useful for discovery and branding, while WhatsApp functioned as a trust-building and order-management channel. The combination gave owners flexibility: they could attract new customers through social media while maintaining repeat buyers through direct communication.

The participants also used platform affordances to segment customers. Student customers responded to affordable menus, short videos, and quick ordering. Office workers valued daily menu reliability and timely delivery. Gift buyers paid attention to packaging, captions, and testimonials. In this sense, platforms helped micro-entrepreneurs translate simple products into differentiated market offers.

Financial Independence and Self-Actualization

The second finding concerns empowerment. Digital platform use strengthened the participants' sense of financial independence because online sales contributed to household expenses, children's needs, savings, or business reinvestment. Even when monthly revenue fluctuated, participants perceived the business as meaningful because it created income from skills and resources they already possessed at home. This is consistent with the view that women's digital entrepreneurship can support economic participation and self-confidence (Olsson & Bernhard, 2021; Rahayu et al., 2023).

Empowerment also appeared as self-actualization. Participants described satisfaction when customers reposted products, left positive reviews, recommended the menu, or returned for repeat orders. Social media visibility made their work publicly recognized. For home-based entrepreneurs, this recognition matters because domestic food production is often treated as ordinary household labor. Digital platforms helped transform that labor into a named brand, a customer-facing product, and a source of identity.

However, empowerment was not linear. Increased orders could improve income while also intensifying workload. Participants had to negotiate family support, cooking schedules, cleaning, packaging, content production, and chat responses. Thus, empowerment through platforms should be understood as negotiated agency: women gain new opportunities, but these opportunities are shaped by time, family arrangements, and the platform environment.

Structural Constraints: Algorithmic Visibility and Price Competition

The third finding indicates that digital platforms create structural constraints. Social media visibility was perceived as unpredictable. Participants felt that posts with similar quality could produce different reach, engagement, and orders. They responded by posting more frequently, following trends, using reels or short videos, changing captions, and monitoring peak hours. These practices show active adaptation, but they also reveal dependence on algorithmic systems that owners do not fully understand or control.

Food delivery applications created a different kind of constraint. They were useful for logistics and exposure, especially for customers who preferred cashless payment and courier delivery. Yet participants also reported that app-based competition encouraged discounting. When competitors joined promotions, customers became more price-sensitive. For small home-based sellers, discount pressure was difficult because ingredient costs, packaging costs, and platform commissions already reduced margins.

This reflects the broader platform-dependency problem identified by Yu and Sekiguchi (2024), where market access is accompanied by dependence and precarity.

The platform environment also tends to favor sellers with stronger resources. Businesses that can pay for ads, join discounts, produce daily content, and handle high order volume are more likely to stay visible. Home-based micro-businesses can compete creatively, but they have limited labor and capital. Therefore, the platform is an equalizer only to a certain extent; it lowers entry barriers but does not remove structural asymmetry.

Psychological and Operational Burdens

The fourth finding concerns the double burden of digital entrepreneurship. Participants were not only cooks or owners; they also acted as content creators, customer service staff, photographers, copywriters, cashiers, quality controllers, and delivery coordinators. The work rhythm was fragmented. While preparing food, they had to reply to chats, update stock, answer delivery questions, check payments, and decide whether to post new content. This multitasking often occurred inside the domestic space, where household tasks continued to demand attention.

This burden was psychological as well as operational. Low engagement could reduce motivation. Negative feedback or delayed courier pickup could create anxiety. The expectation to appear active online made some participants feel that they were always working, even outside cooking hours. The platform economy therefore blurs the boundary between home, work, and personal time. This finding complements studies that recognize digital platforms as enabling resources but also as sources of pressure and unequal workload for women entrepreneurs (Rahayu et al., 2023; Olsson & Bernhard, 2021).

Despite these burdens, participants developed coping strategies. They reused content templates, prepared photo stock, scheduled menu announcements, separated personal and business WhatsApp numbers, limited order quotas, and prioritized repeat customers. These strategies show that home-based entrepreneurs are not passive users of platforms. They actively design routines to preserve autonomy and reduce platform pressure.

Table 2. Main Themes from the Thematic Analysis

Theme	Platform Practice	Empowerment Contribution	Main Challenge	Theme
Market access	Using Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and food delivery apps to introduce menus and manage orders	Expands customer reach beyond neighborhood networks	Visibility depends on algorithmic reach and posting consistency	Market access
Household financial independence	Converting home cooking skills into paid orders and repeat customers	Adds income, savings, and reinvestment capacity	Revenue fluctuates due to demand, promotions, and ingredient costs	Household financial independence
Self-actualization	Building brand identity through photos, testimonials, reels, and product stories	Creates recognition of women's work beyond domestic roles	Requires continuous creativity and emotional resilience	Self-actualization
Platform dependency	Participating in delivery-app marketplaces and social media trends	Provides logistics and discovery infrastructure	Commission fees, price wars, ranking systems, and discount pressure	Platform dependency

Double burden	Combining content creation, customer service, cooking, packaging, and household duties	Encourages digital skill development and autonomy	Time pressure, mental fatigue, and blurred work-home boundaries	Double burden

Discussion

The findings suggest that digital platforms empower women entrepreneurs by creating practical access to markets, customers, and branding tools. This supports digital entrepreneurship literature that views platforms as external enablers for business experimentation and opportunity creation. For the participants, the platform did not simply function as a promotional channel; it became part of the business model. Product design, pricing, packaging, posting schedule, and customer service were adjusted according to digital feedback.

At the same time, the study shows that empowerment through digital platforms is conditional. Platforms help women enter the market, but they also define the rules of visibility and competition. This is particularly important for micro-businesses because they have fewer resources to absorb commission costs, algorithmic fluctuations, and promotional pressure. The result is a paradox: the same platform that expands opportunity can also create dependency. This paradox is central to platform-dependent entrepreneurship (Yu & Sekiguchi, 2024).

The Sleman context adds an important local dimension. The presence of students, tourists, and urban households creates demand for digitally marketed food products. Yet this also produces intense competition because many culinary businesses target similar consumers with similar price ranges. Home-based women entrepreneurs must therefore compete not only on taste but also on speed, visuals, responsiveness, packaging, and online storytelling. Digital skill becomes as important as cooking skill.

The study also expands the concept of women's empowerment by showing that digital entrepreneurship involves emotional labor. Social media requires entrepreneurs to present confidence, friendliness, consistency, and creativity. Food delivery applications require responsiveness and tolerance toward ratings, delays, and complaints. These emotional demands are rarely visible in sales figures but strongly affect women's everyday experience of entrepreneurship.

From a practical perspective, the findings indicate that digital literacy programs for women micro-entrepreneurs should move beyond basic account creation. Training should include platform strategy, simple content planning, pricing after commissions, customer service boundaries, financial recording, online safety, and stress management. The goal should not be to push entrepreneurs into every platform, but to help them choose platform combinations that match their capacity, product type, and family situation.

Policy support is also needed at the local level. Local government, universities, community groups, and business associations in Yogyakarta can create mentoring clusters for home-based culinary entrepreneurs. These clusters can help women share experiences, learn from peers, negotiate suppliers, improve product legality, and reduce isolation. Digital empowerment is more sustainable when it is supported by community learning rather than individual trial and error alone.

CONCLUSION

This descriptive qualitative study explored how female home-based culinary micro-entrepreneurs in Sleman, Yogyakarta, use digital platforms and how those platforms shape empowerment and everyday challenges. The findings show that Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and online food delivery applications provide low-cost market access, help entrepreneurs reach diverse customers, strengthen household financial independence, and create space for self-actualization. Digital platforms allow home-based food

businesses to appear more professional and compete with larger brands through visual branding, customer engagement, and direct communication.

However, the study also finds that digital empowerment is accompanied by structural and psychological burdens. Structural constraints include algorithmic uncertainty, delivery-app commission systems, price wars, and unequal platform visibility. Psychological and operational burdens include the double role of being a producer and a digital marketer, constant customer communication, content fatigue, and blurred boundaries between domestic and business work. Therefore, digital platforms should be understood as both enabling infrastructures and contested spaces of dependence.

Theoretically, this paper contributes to digital entrepreneurship and women's empowerment discussions by showing how platform-based agency operates in home-based culinary micro-businesses. Practically, it recommends targeted digital literacy and mentoring programs that address platform strategy, financial calculation, online safety, and workload management. The study is limited by its small number of participants and the absence of verified direct quotations in this draft. Future research should involve more entrepreneurs across different districts, compare platform users and non-users, and include longitudinal observation of how platform dependency changes over time.

Recommendations

1. Local digital literacy programs should teach practical platform strategy, including content planning, customer segmentation, simple analytics, and safe online communication.
2. Training for culinary micro-businesses should include pricing simulations that account for ingredient costs, packaging, delivery-app commissions, discounts, and labor time.
3. Women entrepreneur communities in Sleman should develop peer mentoring groups so novice entrepreneurs can learn from experienced platform users.
4. Local government and universities can support product legality, menu standardization, halal certification preparation, and packaging improvement so home-based businesses can scale responsibly.
5. Entrepreneurs should avoid overdependence on one platform by combining social media discovery, WhatsApp repeat-order networks, and selective delivery-app participation.

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