

Challenges and Triumphs of Women Entrepreneurs Thriving in the Digital Economy: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract:

Women entrepreneurs in India are pivotal to the country's economic growth, yet they face unique challenges exacerbated by societal norms and structural barriers in the digital economy. This qualitative study examines the experiences of 25 women entrepreneurs across diverse industries, identifying key obstacles such as limited access to funding, gender discrimination, and the demands of balancing personal and professional roles. While the digital economy offers transformative opportunities through cost-effective marketing and enhanced networking, a significant digital skills gap persists. Employing thematic analysis, the study reveals how women entrepreneurs navigate these challenges by leveraging alternative financing methods like crowdfunding, forming supportive networks, and adopting innovative digital strategies. The findings underscore the necessity of targeted interventions, such as mentorship programs, policy reforms, and digital literacy initiatives, to foster an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem. By addressing these gaps, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the strategies and resources required for women entrepreneurs to thrive in the evolving digital landscape.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurs, Digital Economy, Gender Discrimination, Technological Adaptability, Market Competition

1. Introduction:

Women entrepreneurs play a crucial role in fostering economic growth and societal progress. They contribute to innovation, job creation, and poverty alleviation, particularly in developing economies. The Government of India defines women entrepreneurs as individuals or groups who own and control at least 51% of their business capital while employing at least 51% women in their enterprise (Sharma, 2018). However, women entrepreneurs often encounter unique challenges, including limited access to financial resources, gender discrimination, and the complex task of balancing personal and professional responsibilities (Amutha, 2015; Kamberidou, 2020). These barriers often impede their potential to scale businesses and achieve sustainable success.

The digital economy has emerged as a game-changer for entrepreneurship, offering unprecedented opportunities for women to overcome traditional obstacles. Digital tools and platforms enable cost-effective marketing, customer engagement, and global reach, thereby opening new avenues for business expansion (Hazudin et al., 2021). In particular, the flexibility offered by e-commerce and social media allows women to innovate and create businesses that align with their personal and professional goals (Gupta, 2018). Digital entrepreneurship also holds promise for addressing socio-cultural constraints, empowering women to overcome systemic gender inequalities (McAdam et al., 2020). Despite these opportunities, significant challenges persist, including a widening digital skills gap, limited access to technology, and entrenched biases that hinder women from fully leveraging digital platforms (Devi, 2020; Kamberidou, 2020).

Existing research has documented the contributions of women entrepreneurs globally, noting their resilience and innovative strategies in navigating challenges (Brush et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2006). However, studies focusing on women entrepreneurs in India remain relatively scarce. While women in developed economies are often motivated by opportunity, their counterparts in developing economies, including India, frequently pursue entrepreneurship out of necessity (Brush et al., 2010). In addition, Indian women entrepreneurs face unique socio-cultural and infrastructural barriers, such as gender discrimination, limited networking opportunities, and inadequate institutional support (Chunera, 2020; Nayyar et al., 2007). These challenges are compounded by the demands of balancing familial responsibilities and business ventures, often limiting their growth potential (Saurabh, 2012).

The growing digital economy offers a double-edged sword for women entrepreneurs. On one hand, it provides tools to break down traditional barriers through cost-effective business models, enhanced networking opportunities, and greater access to global markets. On the other hand, the digital divide, characterized by disparities in access to digital tools and skills, limits the ability of many women to thrive in this space (Khoo et al., 2023). Furthermore, biases in digital ecosystems and male-dominated networks continue to pose significant challenges (McAdam et al., 2020; Kamberidou, 2013).

This qualitative study addresses the research gap by examining the experiences of 25 women entrepreneurs in India across diverse industries. Using thematic analysis, the study explores critical themes such as access to funding, networking barriers, technological adaptability, and work-life balance. Semi-structured interviews provide deep insights into the strategies employed by women entrepreneurs to navigate the challenges of the digital economy. Key themes include the role of digital skills, the significance of supportive networks, and the impact of socio-cultural norms on entrepreneurial journeys.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

1. To Examine the Role of Digital Platforms in Overcoming Gender-Specific Barriers
2. To Analyze the Influence of Socio-Cultural Factors on Entrepreneurial Decision-Making
3. To Analyze the Role of Networking and Support Systems in Overcoming Gender-Specific Barriers

By situating these findings within the broader discourse on gender and entrepreneurship, this study aims to provide actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and business stakeholders. The findings underscore the importance of targeted interventions such as mentorship programs, policy reforms, and digital literacy initiatives to create an equitable and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem. Furthermore, the study highlights the need to bridge the digital divide and challenge gender biases to unlock the full potential of women entrepreneurs in the digital economy.

In doing so, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on women's entrepreneurship in the digital age, with a specific focus on the Indian context. By addressing both structural and systemic barriers, this study provides a roadmap for empowering women entrepreneurs to thrive in an increasingly digitised world.

2. Review of Literature:

Women's entrepreneurship has experienced significant growth globally, contributing to economic development and job creation (Hechavarría et al., 2019; Ascher, 2012). Despite this progress, women remain underrepresented in high-growth firms (Morris et al., 2006). Factors influencing women's entrepreneurship include individual characteristics, venture strategies, resources, and environmental conditions (Hechavarría et al., 2019). Motivations for starting businesses vary, with women in developed economies more likely driven by opportunity, while those in developing economies are often motivated by necessity (Brush et al., 2010). Challenges faced by women entrepreneurs include

gender discrimination, access to financing, and balancing family responsibilities (Ascher, 2012; Sultana, 2012). Research on women's entrepreneurship has grown but remains limited, comprising less than 10% of all entrepreneurship studies (Brush et al., 2010). To advance the field, scholars suggest applying feminist theories alongside existing entrepreneurship frameworks and conducting more transnational studies (Yadav & Unni, 2016).

Women entrepreneurs in India face numerous challenges that hinder their success. Financial constraints, including lack of access to credit and inadequate working capital, are major obstacles (Chander & Arora, 2013; Veena & Nagaraja, 2014). Social barriers such as gender discrimination, family discouragement, and male dominance also impede their progress (Chunera, 2020). Personal limitations like lack of self-confidence, fear of failure, and dual responsibilities at home and work further complicate their entrepreneurial journey (Saurabh, 2012; Chunera, 2020). Other significant challenges include inadequate institutional support, marketing difficulties, and limited access to business networks (Nayyar et al., 2007). Women entrepreneurs also struggle with a lack of managerial skills, technological knowledge, and access to raw materials (Shinde & Shrivastava, 2014; Maheswari & Philip, 2020). Despite facing barriers like limited access to finance, networks, and technology, play a crucial role in economic development, especially in emerging economies. (ShahijaV, 2020; Dey, 2019).

However, women entrepreneurs often display resilience and innovative coping strategies to overcome these obstacles (Loh & Dahesihsari, 2013). Social media and information technologies have emerged as powerful tools for empowering women entrepreneurs, enhancing their social capital and self-efficacy (Ajjan et al., 2014; Chaker & Zouaoui, 2022). Despite facing cultural and societal constraints, women entrepreneurs in various sectors, including high-tech industries, have shown the ability to outperform their male counterparts (Tan, 2008). Governments and organisations are increasingly recognizing the importance of supporting women entrepreneurs through various initiatives (Jacob, 2023). As women's participation in entrepreneurship continues to grow, it contributes significantly to job creation, economic growth, and societal revitalization (Mahesh, 2020).

The study is underpinned by a dual theoretical framework, combining elements of feminist theory and entrepreneurship theory to provide a nuanced understanding of women's entrepreneurial experiences in the digital economy. Feminist theory offers critical insights into the structural and systemic barriers that women face, such as gender discrimination, unequal access to resources, and societal expectations, which are deeply rooted in patriarchal norms (Brush et al., 2010; Kamberidou, 2020). This perspective aligns with intersectionality, emphasizing how factors like gender, age, and socio-economic status intersect to shape women's entrepreneurial journeys (McAdam et al., 2020). Meanwhile, entrepreneurship theory contributes by exploring the individual and contextual factors that influence entrepreneurial success, including access to resources, opportunity recognition, and innovation (Hechavarría et al., 2019). By integrating these frameworks, the study situates the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs within broader systemic issues while also examining the role of agency, resilience, and digital tools in overcoming these barriers. This approach not only highlights the interplay between structure and agency but also provides a holistic understanding of the dynamics shaping women's participation in the digital economy.

3. Research Methodology

In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 women entrepreneurs actively participating in the digital economy, selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of industries, business sizes, and geographical locations. Each interview, lasting between 60 to 90 minutes, was recorded with consent and focused on various aspects of their entrepreneurial experiences, including economics, funds, investments, societal acceptance, networking, gender

discrimination, family dynamics, support systems, personal and professional responsibilities, technological adaptability, accessibility, raw materials, infrastructure, market competition, and business education.

3.1 Participant Demographics

The study involves 25 women entrepreneurs selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of industries, business sizes, and geographical locations. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 50 years, representing industries such as retail, e-commerce, technology, education, health and wellness, and artisanal crafts. Approximately 60% of participants operated small-scale businesses, while the remaining represented medium-scale enterprises. Geographically, the participants hailed from both urban centers like Mumbai and Bengaluru and smaller towns across India, providing a comprehensive view of entrepreneurial experiences in varied socio-economic and cultural contexts.

3.2 Sample Size and Relevance

The sample size of 25 participants was deemed sufficient for achieving data saturation, a key criterion in qualitative research where no new themes emerge from additional data collection. This size ensures a diverse yet manageable dataset that balances depth and breadth. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the sample size allows for an in-depth understanding of individual experiences while also identifying broader trends and patterns. The diversity of participants enhances the study's credibility and transferability, enabling findings to be relevant across different sectors and regions within India's digital economy.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent, and measures were taken to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality. Interviews were conducted in a manner that respected participants' schedules and preferences, with an emphasis on creating a comfortable and open dialogue.

3.4 Rationale for Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and effectiveness in identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. This method aligns closely with the study's research questions, which aim to uncover the systemic barriers and opportunities encountered by women entrepreneurs. By employing thematic analysis, the study captures both shared experiences and individual nuances, ensuring a holistic understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework was employed to guide the analysis process, including familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, theme development, and refinement. This iterative process ensures that the findings are deeply rooted in the data while remaining relevant to the study's objectives.

4. Results:

The findings from this study illuminate the challenges and opportunities faced by women entrepreneurs in the digital economy, with each theme providing a nuanced understanding of their experiences. These results are contextualized within existing literature to demonstrate alignment or divergence, offering fresh insights into the dynamics of digital entrepreneurship.

4.1 Funds

Access to Capital

Access to capital emerged as a pervasive challenge, with respondents highlighting difficulties in securing funding from traditional financial institutions. Many participants reported encountering skepticism from lenders regarding their business potential and financial acumen. These findings are consistent with Chander and Arora's (2013) study, which noted that financial constraints, especially

lack of credit access, are among the most significant barriers for women entrepreneurs. Participants' experiences also align with ShahijaV (2020), who emphasized systemic biases that favor male-led businesses.

Innovative Financing Solutions

Despite these obstacles, women entrepreneurs have increasingly turned to alternative financing methods, such as crowdfunding, microfinance, and angel investors, to address funding gaps. This aligns with Gupta's (2018) assertion that digital platforms democratize access to funding, although participants noted that investor confidence in women-led digital ventures remains inconsistent. This finding diverges slightly from earlier literature by emphasizing the growing role of informal networks and peer-to-peer funding in bridging financial gaps.

4.2 Investments

Investment in Technology

Participants identified technology as a critical investment for maintaining competitiveness in the digital economy. However, many cited difficulties in securing venture capital to fund such advancements. This resonates with findings by Khoo et al. (2023), which underscore the financial challenges women face in scaling technological solutions.

Personal and External Investments

In the absence of institutional support, many women relied on personal savings or family loans to fund their ventures. While this strategy ensures operational continuity, it limits scalability and long-term growth. This aligns with Sultana's (2012) observations but also highlights a divergence: participants stressed the importance of venture capital and angel investors, signaling an evolving entrepreneurial landscape where external investments are increasingly prioritized.

4.3 Networking

Building Networks

Networking remains critical for business growth, yet many respondents reported exclusion from male-dominated networks. Kamberidou (2020) also observed such challenges, emphasizing their role in restricting women's access to mentorship and resources.

Supportive Communities

To counter these barriers, women entrepreneurs actively sought out or created women-centric communities. These platforms provided opportunities for mentorship, collaboration, and resource sharing. This finding aligns with Ajjan et al. (2014), who highlighted the empowering potential of digital networks, but also underscores a divergence by showing the proactive agency of women entrepreneurs in building these support systems.

4.4 Gender Discrimination

Bias and Stereotypes

Gender bias continues to hinder women entrepreneurs, manifesting in unequal treatment during funding evaluations, client interactions, and networking events. This aligns with McAdam et al. (2020), who discussed the intersectionality of gender and entrepreneurship, but extends their work by illustrating how these biases persist even in digital ecosystems.

Advocacy and Education

Participants emphasized the need for gender equity initiatives within entrepreneurial ecosystems. Their efforts to challenge stereotypes reflect a shift from passivity to advocacy, a divergence from earlier studies that portrayed women entrepreneurs as primarily reactive to systemic inequities (Brush et al., 2010).

4.5 Support Systems

Mentorship and Guidance

The study found mentorship to be a critical factor for entrepreneurial success, with participants valuing guidance from experienced professionals. However, the availability of mentors, particularly in male-dominated industries, remains limited. This finding aligns with Kamberidou (2013), who stressed the importance of mentorship in overcoming systemic barriers.

Family and Community Support

Support from family and local communities emerged as another key enabler. Participants with supportive families reported fewer challenges in balancing entrepreneurial and personal roles. This echoes Nayyar et al. (2007) but adds depth by highlighting how community networks supplement familial support in fostering resilience and growth.

4.6 Expectations and Responsibilities

Balancing Roles

Balancing entrepreneurial responsibilities with personal and familial obligations remains a significant challenge for women entrepreneurs. This aligns with Saurabh's (2012) findings on dual responsibilities, with participants frequently citing societal expectations as a source of stress.

Time Management Strategies

Participants employed strategies such as delegating tasks, setting boundaries, and leveraging digital tools to manage their roles effectively. This divergence from earlier studies highlights the increasing role of technology in facilitating work-life balance for women entrepreneurs.

4.7 Accessibility

Digital Literacy and Skills

A significant digital skills gap limits women's ability to fully leverage opportunities in the digital economy. This finding aligns with Devi (2020), who emphasized the role of digital literacy in enabling women entrepreneurs. Participants underscored the value of targeted training programs, suggesting that current offerings remain insufficient.

Training and Resources

Informal learning and peer support emerged as critical tools for bridging digital literacy gaps. This highlights a divergence from existing literature by emphasizing grassroots efforts to address accessibility challenges.

4.8 Technological Adaptability

Embracing Innovation

Participants stressed the importance of staying technologically updated to maintain competitiveness. This aligns with McAdam et al. (2020), but the study also underscores participants' proactive efforts to integrate innovative tools into their business models, reflecting a growing culture of adaptability.

Challenges in Adaptation

Despite these efforts, barriers such as limited technical expertise and high costs persist. These findings align with Kamberidou (2020) but add nuance by showing how participants navigate these challenges through continuous learning and collaboration.

4.9 Raw Materials, Infrastructure, and Competition Supply Chain Management

Challenges in sourcing raw materials and managing logistics were frequently cited. Participants reported that inadequate infrastructure and intense competition exacerbate these issues. This aligns with Shinde and Shrivastava’s (2014) work on infrastructural barriers but diverges by highlighting participants’ use of technology to streamline supply chains.

Competitive Strategies

Participants employed strategies such as diversifying suppliers and leveraging technology to mitigate risks. This finding reflects a shift towards innovative approaches in addressing market competition, aligning with Ndou et al. (2024).

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate both alignment with and divergence from existing literature. While challenges such as funding constraints, gender discrimination, and digital literacy gaps persist, women entrepreneurs in the digital economy display remarkable resilience and adaptability. By leveraging digital tools, forming supportive networks, and advocating for systemic change, they are not only overcoming barriers but also redefining entrepreneurship in emerging markets. These insights underscore the need for policies and programs that address structural inequities while fostering innovation and inclusivity.

Table 1. Organization of Themes

THEME	CODE	DESCRIPTION	OBJECTIVE
Challenges in Funding	Self-reliance	Relying on family support and personal savings due to external funding challenges.	Funds
Influence of Funds	Funding advantages	Adequate access to funds positively impacts business growth and sustainability through more resources.	
Investment Factors	Financial juggling	Managing business expenses alongside home expenditures.	Investments
Self-Funding	Self-financing digitalization	Investing in digital tools, primarily relying on self-funding.	
Networking Challenges	Demographic disadvantages	Age and gender-specific challenges, market unfamiliarity, and feelings of inferiority.	Networking

Importance of Networking	Collaborative Synergy	Networking fosters valuable relationships, business opportunities, resources, insights, and growth.	
Gender Discrimination	Gender Bias	Male partners preferred in financial dealings, sector-dependent bias, facing discrimination in certain sectors.	Gender Discrimination
Family Support	Business Family Advantage	Supportive families, especially those with business backgrounds.	Support Systems
Scepticism from Relatives	Validation Pressure	Relatives may demand proof of business viability.	
Balancing Responsibilities	Role Overlap	Juggling financial responsibilities at home and in business, significant overlap in roles.	Expectations and Responsibilities
Digital Tools Accessibility	Costly Opportunities	Digital tools are accessible but costly; offer opportunities for recognition and market reach.	Accessibility
Technological Training	Ongoing Education	Training and continuous learning needed for acquiring and utilising technological resources.	Technological Adaptability
Infrastructure Issues	Infrastructure Gaps	Need for formal office spaces for client interactions; highlights infrastructural challenges.	Raw Materials, Infrastructure, and Competition
Market Competition	Competitive Strategies	Intense competition with clients engaging multiple sellers; strategies include addressing competitors' weaknesses.	

5. Discussions:

Global Trends and the Unique Indian Context

The findings of this study align with global trends documented in reports such as the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) Report 2023-24, which highlights the persistent funding gaps and limited networks faced by women entrepreneurs worldwide. Globally, women account for approximately 30% of entrepreneurial activities, yet only 20% of women-led startups receive venture capital compared to 30% for male-led startups. These disparities are mirrored in India, where gendered financial biases remain a critical obstacle. However, the Indian context presents unique challenges such as complex regulatory frameworks, limited property rights, and validation pressures from familial and societal expectations, as noted by the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law Report (2023) and the IFC's Women Entrepreneurs in India Report (2023).

Despite these hurdles, Indian women entrepreneurs demonstrate remarkable resilience by leveraging innovative financing strategies such as microfinance, crowdfunding, and angel investments. The rise of digital platforms has further facilitated the formation of women-centric networks, enabling

mentorship and peer support, which are critical for navigating male-dominated entrepreneurial ecosystems. While these findings align with global trends of women entrepreneurs excelling when adequately supported (McKinsey & Company, 2022), the socio-cultural nuances of the Indian context, such as balancing traditional gender roles with entrepreneurial ambitions, add layers of complexity.

Implications for Policymakers

Policymakers must address structural and systemic barriers that disproportionately impact women entrepreneurs in India. Key policy interventions could include:

1. **Improving Access to Finance:** Expanding microfinance schemes, subsidizing interest rates for women entrepreneurs, and incentivizing venture capital investments in women-led startups can bridge funding gaps.
2. **Digital Inclusion:** Launching targeted digital literacy programs and reducing the costs of digital tools can enhance women entrepreneurs' access to the digital economy.
3. **Simplifying Regulatory Frameworks:** Reducing bureaucratic complexities and ensuring property rights for women will foster an equitable business environment.
4. **Gender-Sensitive Policies:** Initiatives promoting gender equality in entrepreneurship, including awareness campaigns and diversity incentives, can reduce stereotypes and biases.

Implications for Educators

Educational institutions play a crucial role in equipping women with the skills and confidence required for entrepreneurial success. This study underscores the importance of:

1. **Entrepreneurship Education:** Embedding entrepreneurship modules into academic curricula, with a focus on digital skills and financial literacy.
2. **Mentorship Programs:** Facilitating partnerships between women entrepreneurs and experienced mentors, particularly in male-dominated industries.
3. **Skill Development Initiatives:** Offering workshops and certifications in technological adaptability, supply chain management, and innovative financing strategies.

Implications for Entrepreneurs

Women entrepreneurs themselves can take proactive steps to navigate the challenges identified in this study:

1. **Leveraging Digital Networks:** Engaging with online communities designed for women entrepreneurs to access mentorship, resources, and collaboration opportunities.
2. **Continuous Learning:** Staying updated on industry trends and acquiring new skills to enhance competitiveness in the digital economy.
3. **Advocacy and Collaboration:** Advocating for gender equality in business environments and forming alliances to collectively address systemic biases.

Future Research Areas

While this study provides valuable insights, it also highlights areas requiring further exploration:

1. **Intersectionality in Entrepreneurship:** Examining how intersecting identities (e.g., caste, religion, and socio-economic status) shape the experiences of women entrepreneurs in India.
2. **Impact of Digital Ecosystems:** Investigating the long-term impact of digital platforms on the growth trajectories of women-led businesses.
3. **Sector-Specific Challenges:** Conducting sector-wise analyses to identify unique challenges and opportunities in industries dominated by women entrepreneurs.
4. **Evaluation of Policy Interventions:** Assessing the effectiveness of government programs aimed at supporting women entrepreneurs in India.

Conclusion

Indian women entrepreneurs operate at the intersection of global trends and unique local challenges. While they face significant barriers, their resilience, adaptability, and innovative use of digital tools offer a pathway for overcoming these obstacles. By addressing funding gaps, enhancing digital inclusion, and fostering supportive ecosystems, stakeholders can unlock the full potential of women entrepreneurs. Ultimately, a multifaceted approach involving policymakers, educators, and the entrepreneurs themselves is essential for creating a more inclusive and equitable entrepreneurial landscape in India.

6. Conclusion:

This study aimed to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by women entrepreneurs thriving in the digital economy, with a focus on several key objectives: Funds, Investments, Networking, Gender Discrimination, Support Systems, Expectations and Responsibilities, Accessibility, Technological Adaptability, and Raw Materials, Infrastructure, and Competition. Through a detailed analysis, the research uncovered significant insights into the multifaceted experiences of women entrepreneurs.

Women entrepreneurs often struggle with accessing financial resources, which limits their ability to scale and invest in growth opportunities. Despite these challenges, many women demonstrate resilience by utilising alternative funding sources and innovative financing strategies. Effective networking provides crucial business opportunities and support, but women frequently face barriers in male-dominated networks. The rise of digital platforms has helped create women-centric networks, offering valuable connections and support. Biases and stereotypes hinder women's professional advancement, yet increasing awareness and advocacy for gender equality are creating a more inclusive business environment, encouraging more women to pursue entrepreneurship. Mentorship, peer support, and professional development resources are vital for women entrepreneurs, making robust support systems essential for fostering a conducive environment for women-led businesses. Women entrepreneurs juggle multiple roles and responsibilities, requiring effective time management and organisational skills. Societal expectations and traditional gender roles add complexity, necessitating a supportive network. Digital technologies have improved access to markets, information, and resources, enabling broader reach, although disparities in digital literacy and infrastructure still pose challenges, particularly in developing regions. Embracing technology and continuously updating skills are crucial for women entrepreneurs to leverage digital tools for business growth. Encouraging technological proficiency and providing relevant training enhances competitiveness. Access to quality raw materials and reliable infrastructure is fundamental for business sustainability, and navigating competitive markets requires strategic planning and innovation.

In conclusion, while women entrepreneurs face numerous challenges in the digital economy, they also encounter significant opportunities. By addressing the identified obstacles and leveraging available resources and support systems, women entrepreneurs can overcome barriers and achieve sustainable growth. The findings of this study underscore the importance of continued efforts to create an equitable and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem, empowering women to contribute meaningfully to the digital economy.

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