The role of digital platforms in supporting women during the critical nascent stages of venture creation: evidence from Zanzibar

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ABSTRACT

The emergence and advancement of digital technologies have changed entrepreneurial processes through offering opportunities in the processes of business creation, market entry, and customer interactions. This study assessed the significance of activities relating to digital platforms in the process of opportunity recognition by women nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar. Specifically, the study sought to determine the impact of online customer interaction, online networking, and digital marketing on opportunity recognition. Guided by the theory of digital entrepreneurship and social capital theory, the study embraced positivism research philosophy with a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. A total of 260 women nascent entrepreneurs were interviewed using a structured questionnaire while data analysis was performed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4. The results show that online customer interaction ($\beta = 0.342$, $p < 0.001$), online networking ($\beta = 0.318$, $p < 0.001$), and digital marketing ($\beta = 0.287$, $p < 0.001$) positively and significantly affect opportunity recognition. Of all the predictor variables, online customer interaction is the most powerful determinant of opportunity recognition. The model accounts for 66.2% of variance in opportunity recognition ($R^2 = 0.662$). The study concludes that digital platforms serve as important entrepreneurial resources that facilitate access to market information, customer insights, and business networks, thereby enhancing opportunity recognition among women entrepreneurs. The study recommends strengthening digital entrepreneurship training, improving digital infrastructure, and promoting online networking initiatives to enhance women's entrepreneurial participation and economic empowerment in Zanzibar.

Keywords: Digital Platforms, Digital Entrepreneurship, Nascent Ventures Creation, Women Entrepreneurship, Zanzibar Emerging Economy

I. INTRODUCTION

Women entrepreneurship is increasingly regarded as a vital factor towards achieving inclusive economic growth, job creation, and poverty alleviation in developed and developing countries (Hammad & El Naggar, 2023; Riojas, 2023). Women entrepreneurs provide significant contribution towards the financial status of households, economic development of communities, and social welfare in particular within the Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized enterprise (MSME) segment. Emerging economy women entrepreneurs are often engaged in ventures which help create jobs, improve the living standards of families, and make communities resilient (McAdam et al., 2020). As such, supporting women entrepreneurs has become one of the key policy areas in the context of sustainable economic transformation.

However, although their importance in terms of economic activity has been on the rise, women entrepreneurs have faced many structural, institutional, and sociocultural obstacles which hinder business formation and development (Sundermeier et al., 2018). Some previous researchers have identified lack of finance, poor business knowledge, insufficient entrepreneurial networks, market access limitations, and gendered social norms as the main hindrances faced by women-owned ventures (Ahmed et al., 2026; Salamzadeh et al., 2024, 2026; Swartz et al., 2022). The issue is particularly acute at the early stage of entrepreneurship, which can be viewed as the crucial phase between business idea conception and its realization. During this phase, entrepreneurs have to identify opportunities, allocate resources, build customer relations, and create market presence under uncertain and resource-scarce circumstances (Moetse, 2019). This is why women-owned enterprises find it challenging to move from the phase of surviving in an informal economy to becoming sustainable and growing firms.

The spread of digital technologies has revolutionized the field of entrepreneurship by bringing about business creation, participation in the market, and allocation of resources opportunities. Digital entrepreneurship can be defined as activities carried out, mediated, or transformed by means of digital technologies and the digital (Mhlongo et al., 2024;

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Nyamboga, 2025). Digital entrepreneurs can use digital tools like WhatsApp Business, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and mobile money applications for communication with customers, advertising their goods and services, gathering business information, networking, and conducting transactions at a fairly low cost (Adewusi et al., 2020). Digital technologies help to eliminate informational inequalities, reduce transaction costs, and give entrepreneurs alternative channels for allocating resources which could not have been accessed otherwise (Mashapure et al., 2025).

Women entrepreneurs, in particular, can greatly benefit from digital platforms because of existing mobility constraints and lack of access to the formal marketplace and conventional business networks (Kapinga, 2020; Ndandani, 2022; Nziku et al., 2024). According to the existing empirical researches, digital technologies increase customer involvement, boost marketing efficiency, provide networking chances and add value to entrepreneurial performance (Churk, 2023). In addition, due to digital technologies constant interactions occur between entrepreneurs, customers, suppliers and other stakeholders, which increase the access to the information and possibility to find the business opportunities.

Although a large body of research in digital entrepreneurship has been developed in recent years, several gaps still exist. Current studies mostly focus on the companies that already exist and their general performance results while paying little attention to the difficulties that women face when creating a startup company (Churk, 2023; Sungura, 2025). Further current studies do not consider mechanisms that lead to opportunity recognition by women entrepreneurs through digital platforms (Kapinga, 2020; Mashapure et al., 2025). Finally, empirical studies about the impact of digital platforms on entrepreneurship in sub-Saharan Africa are underdeveloped, although this region experiences fast development of mobile Internet connection and use of digital platforms. Particularly, there are few studies devoted to the analysis of influence of online customer interaction, online networking and digital marketing on opportunity recognition by women nascent entrepreneurs in resource-constrained environment.

Such deficiencies are clearly noticeable in Zanzibar, where businesses owned by women are mainly engaged in micro and informal sectors where finance is scarce and access to entrepreneurship development services and support is not provided. Meanwhile, there have been numerous developments in the field of mobile phones, mobile money, and use of social media in Zanzibar. Little is known about the ways in which women entrepreneurs use such technologies at the early stages of venture creation. In particular, it is unknown whether such technology platforms help women recognize entrepreneurial opportunities. Against this backdrop, this research addresses the question of how digital technology platforms assist women during the venture creation process. In particular, this study investigates the effects of online customer interaction, online networking, and digital marketing on opportunity recognition among women nascent entrepreneurs (Komunte, 2015). Specifically, this study investigated the influence of digital platforms on customer interaction among women nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar; assessed the role of digital platforms in enhancing entrepreneurial networking during venture creation among women nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar; and evaluated the influence of digital platforms on market access among women-led nascent ventures in Zanzibar. Through examining the under-researched developing country context, the research contributes to both digital entrepreneurship and women entrepreneurship literature.

This study is important due to the contributions that it makes to the body of literature on digital entrepreneurship. More specifically, it provides empirical proof about the impact of customer engagement online, online networking, and digital marketing on increasing opportunities for recognition amongst female nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar. It helps advance the understanding of the Digital Entrepreneurship Theory and the Social Capital Theory in the context of developing countries. It bridges the gap in terms of lack of empirical studies on how digital technology is used by women entrepreneurs in the context of Zanzibar. The study gives vital information that will assist policy makers, entrepreneur's development institutions, development partners, and women entrepreneurs in the use of digital tools for customer engagement, business networking, and market intelligence.

1.1 Research Objective

i. To examine the influence of online customer interaction on opportunity recognition among women nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar.
ii. To assess the influence of online networking on opportunity recognition among women nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar.
iii. To evaluate the influence of digital marketing on opportunity recognition among women nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Digital Entrepreneurship Theory

Digital Entrepreneurship Theory helps us understand the ways in which the application of digital technology revolutionizes the entrepreneurship process by helping entrepreneurs discover opportunities, mobilize resources, interact with customers and create value through digital technology. The theory was developed extensively by Nambisan (2017), who defined digital entrepreneurship as entrepreneurship that is enabled, facilitated and transformed by the use of digital technology. Contrasting from conventional entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship makes it possible for entrepreneurs to leverage their use of social media, mobile technology, online markets and electronic communications to get around the obstacles of distance and resource shortages.

The theory is especially applicable in cases of women entrepreneurs working within developing countries where issues like finance, market entry, and business development services present challenges. Using digital technology through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp Business, and mobile money transfer apps, women entrepreneurs are able to sell products, find customers, collect market intelligence and identify new opportunities at a lower cost. Recent studies have indicated that women's business entrepreneurship is significantly boosted by the application of digital technology (Ahmed et al., 2026; Salamzadeh et al., 2024). Within the current study, the application of Digital Entrepreneurship Theory describes how the interaction of customers through online medium and digital marketing help in opportunity identification by the nascent women entrepreneurs in Zanzibar.

2.1.2 Social Capital Theory

The Social Capital Theory is developed from the foundational writings of Bourdieu (1986) and and Putnam (1993) which together postulate that social relations are assets that can be exploited by individuals in order to meet economic and social objectives. The theory postulates that social networks, trust, social norms and social interaction help in gaining access to information, resources, support and opportunities that may be difficult otherwise. Social capital is an important factor within entrepreneurship literature, where entrepreneurs can use their social capital to access information, legitimacy, opportunity and resources needed for business activities.

The advent of digital platforms has increased chances for social capital creation and exploitation in a significant manner. Digital platforms help entrepreneurs in making contacts and building relationships with customers, suppliers, mentors, investors, and other entrepreneurs irrespective of geographical limitations. Several studies have shown that digital networking increases entrepreneurial opportunity identification by allowing exchange of information and creating contact with wider entrepreneurial communities (Hammad & El Naggar, 2023; Moetse, 2019). For women entrepreneurs, online networking serves as an important mechanism that enables them to overcome various social and institutional constraints by gaining access to entrepreneurial networks and markets. Thus, Social Capital Theory helps in understanding the process of online networking and customer interactions resulting in opportunity identification by women nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Online Customer Interaction and Opportunity Recognition

Interaction with customers online has emerged as a key aspect of entrepreneurial efforts in the digital age. With the help of various digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp for businesses, TikTok, and other online marketplaces, entrepreneurs can connect directly with customers, get feedback, learn about customer preferences, and identify evolving customer needs. In contrast to traditional personal encounters, digital customer interaction allows entrepreneurs to continuously gather information in real time, hence minimizing uncertainty in their decision-making process during venture creation. As Nambisan (2017) argues, digital technologies enable the recognition of entrepreneurial opportunities through the ability of entrepreneurs to access information generated by customers. The significance of customer interaction is heightened at the early stage of entrepreneurship when entrepreneurs usually lack knowledge about markets and have few resources available. By continuously engaging with customers, entrepreneurs can test their business ideas; validate assumptions and value propositions without investing heavily into them.

A number of empirical investigations have provided evidence for the link between online customer interaction and entrepreneurial opportunity identification. According to Hammad and El Naggar (2023), online digital platform usage contributes positively towards entrepreneurship opportunity creation as it makes it possible for customers to give their feedback, share their information, and exchange their knowledge. In the same way, Swartz et al. (2022) indicated that women entrepreneurs based in South Africa who used digital platforms to interact with customers exhibited better entrepreneurial opportunity identification skills. Additionally, Ahmed et al. (2026) discovered that digital technology increases access to market information among women entrepreneurs.

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In Africa, Churk (2023) noted that online customer interactions played an important role in fostering financial empowerment among women entrepreneurs in Tanzania through enhanced customer communication and increased business visibility. In the same region, Kapinga (2020) also revealed that mobile technology had helped women entrepreneurs enhance their customer relations and market reach in the food processing industry in Tanzania. Further, Sungura (2025) reported that Facebook had opened avenues for low-income women in Dodoma to interact with customers, market their products, and even identify income-generating activities. Outside Africa, Riojas (2023) found that online communities have created alternative routes through which women entrepreneurs can access their customers and seek funding opportunities. These findings seem to indicate that customer interaction online has a critical role in enabling opportunity identification for entrepreneurs. Nonetheless, there is very limited empirical research on the effects of online customer interaction on opportunity identification among women nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar.

2.2.2 Online Networking and Opportunity Recognition

Networking has become an effective way of accessing information, resources, support and business opportunities by entrepreneurs. Networking allows entrepreneurs to create connections with customers, suppliers, investors, mentors and other entrepreneurs who provide valuable information and resources. The phenomenon of online networking becomes prevalent in the digital economy through such social media platforms as LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, virtual communities and digital entrepreneurial ecosystems. Such means help entrepreneurs to overcome geographical constraints and get access to stakeholders from various regions and industries.

The role of online networking in entrepreneurial development is empirically proven. According to Moetse (2019), digital technologies have extended significantly the networking possibilities for female entrepreneurs through access to broader communities. The same is shown by Hammad and El Naggar (2023), who revealed that online social capital had a positive impact on opportunity recognition for entrepreneurship due to the ability to access the information and resources. Swartz et al. (2022) identified that women entrepreneurs in South Africa used digital tools to create professional networks for expanding their businesses and identifying new opportunities.

Further research also supports these findings. Ndandani (2022) discovered that socially situated mobile technologies have increased the inclusivity of female informal traders in Africa through business networks and knowledge exchange. Mashapure et al. (2025) noted that digital technologies assist women entrepreneurs in overcoming gender-based challenges by linking them to marketplaces, mentors, and institutions of support. Moreover, Nziku et al. (2024) noted that digital networking plays an important role in women entrepreneurship by expanding their reach into entrepreneurial ecosystems and supporting structures. In Zimbabwe, Mashapure et al. (2025) also discovered that women entrepreneurs actively engaged in digital networking possessed business resilience and were able to access more entrepreneurial opportunities. However, there is no data available on the role of online networking in opportunity identification for women nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar, and this should be researched further.

2.2.3 Digital Marketing and Opportunity Recognition

Digital marketing has proved to be one of the most powerful tools for promoting entrepreneurship in the current era of the digital economy. It is the use of digital technologies and platforms for marketing goods and services, communicating with clients, building brands, and transacting. From the perspective of entrepreneurship, opportunity discovery is a process involving constant scanning of the environment for unmet customer needs, trends, and gaps in the market. Digital marketing helps entrepreneurs in doing so by providing important information about customers' preferences, buying behavior, and market demand. Entrepreneurs can understand market dynamics and discover profitable opportunities through social media metrics, customer engagement metrics, online review sites, and metrics of the effectiveness of digital advertisements. According to Nambisan (2017), digital technologies change the process of entrepreneurial opportunity discovery since entrepreneurs can test business models, receive instant feedback from the market, and make informed decisions. In other words, digital marketing is not only useful for promoting products but is a source of strategic information as well.

A number of empirical research papers have shown how digital marketing helps in entrepreneurial development and opportunity identification. According to Ahmed et al. (2026), digitalization has been shown to increase entrepreneurial opportunities among women entrepreneurs due to increased market visibility, customer coverage, and availability of information about businesses. It was evident from the study that women entrepreneurs who use digital marketing methods effectively are better able to spot market opportunities and extend business operations. In the same way, Salamzadeh et al. (2024) found that digital technology provides women entrepreneurs with an opportunity to overcome conventional market hurdles and be involved in entrepreneurial activities.

The evidence of Africa also shows the significance of digital marketing in the growth of entrepreneurship. As mentioned in the study conducted by Adewusi et al. (2020), digital marketing plays an essential role in fostering entrepreneurship development and inclusive innovation through the facilitation of access to customers and marketing of products by female entrepreneurs. Similarly, the study conducted by Mhlongo et al. (2024) showed the contribution of

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digital platforms in fostering entrepreneurship development in various African countries due to enhanced market access and marketing. The conclusion drawn by the researchers is that digital marketing technologies provide opportunities for the identification of market opportunities for entrepreneurs.

Other studies carried out in Tanzania have also contributed evidence on the importance of digital marketing in the women's entrepreneurial activities. Kapinga (2020) noted that mobile devices had helped improve the performance of women entrepreneurs in the food processing industry through communication, marketing, and attracting customers. In a similar vein, Churk (2023) pointed out that social media had helped financially empower women entrepreneurs in enhancing the visibility of their businesses and allowing them to reach wider markets of potential customers. Additionally, Sungura (2025) revealed that Facebook was an efficient marketing tool for low-income women entrepreneurs by helping promote their products, engage their customers, and earn income. Overall, these studies have shown that digital marketing helps entrepreneurs to acquire market information.

Outside of Africa, McAdam et al. (2020) suggested that digital entrepreneurship has emancipatory capacity in that it allows female entrepreneurs to break free from institutional and gender-based restrictions. This is possible through digital marketing channels, which help female entrepreneurs reach customers beyond local markets and engage in broader economic activities. In addition, Nyamboga (2025) discovered that digital innovation strategies play an integral part in the success of women entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, according to Salamzadeh et al. (2026), digital empowerments efforts help improve the entrepreneurial performance of women by increasing their involvement in digital markets and providing more entrepreneurial opportunities. Therefore, it can be concluded that digital marketing serves as both a tool for promotion and as a means of identifying entrepreneurial opportunities.

Though there has been an increase in research on the effects of digital marketing on entrepreneurship, there are still significant gaps in the body of knowledge. Current research has paid more attention to the impact of digital marketing on firm performance, sales revenue, acquiring customers, and financial results but has paid little attention to the contribution of digital marketing towards opportunity recognition at the early stages of venture formation. Moreover, there is scant research on the empirical aspects of digital marketing in Zanzibar, which has seen the rising use of digital marketing by women entrepreneurs. There has, therefore, not been enough understanding of the contribution of digital marketing in opportunity recognition of women nascent entrepreneurs in a constrained environment.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Philosophy

This study was founded on the positivist research philosophy, under which the nature of reality is assumed to exist independently and objectively and is measurable through empirical observation and statistics. The positivist paradigm is very common in entrepreneurship and management studies owing to its focus on collecting data and analyzing theories based on objective and quantifiable measures (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This philosophy is especially useful in this study as it involves the assessment of the impact of online customer engagement, online networking, and online marketing on opportunity recognition in women nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar. These relationships may be assessed empirically and statistically for the creation of generalizable knowledge. The positivist approach facilitates hypothesis and theory testing through the examination of the causal relations between variables through objective measures.

3.2 Research Design

Quantitative research design with a cross-sectional survey approach was used in this research study. It was deemed fit to use this quantitative approach because it helps in collecting numeric data that can be analyzed through statistical tests to establish relationships among variables. Moreover, this research design helps in generating objective results, which enhances generalizability to the larger population of women nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar (Saunders et al., 2020). This is because the current study aims at investigating the relationship between online customer interaction, online networking, digital marketing, and opportunity recognition.

Cross-sectional survey design was used since data was collected from respondents during one point in time. It is appropriate when a researcher is interested in describing the phenomena being studied and the relationships among variables, but no manipulation of the research setting is made (Kumar, 2019). Besides, this type of design helps in collecting data from many people within a relatively short period and at a relatively lower cost. It has been widely applied in the field of entrepreneurship and digital technologies studies due to its ability to explore behaviors, perceptions, and experience of entrepreneurs.

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3.3 Study Area

This research was carried out in Zanzibar, which is a semi-autonomous part of the United Republic of Tanzania. Zanzibar was chosen due to the increased use of digital technology by women entrepreneurs and the significance of small and micro enterprises in the local economy. There have been tremendous increases in terms of mobile phones, mobile money, social media, and the Internet in Zanzibar, which makes the environment favorable for digital entrepreneurship. Even with these changes, women entrepreneurs still experience difficulties in accessing finances, markets, and entrepreneurial services, hence making Zanzibar a suitable environment for researching the role of digital platforms in opportunity identification at the early stage of venture creation.

3.4 Target Population

The selected target population was women nascent entrepreneurs who were working in Zanzibar. As described by Willie (2024) ascent entrepreneurs referred to people who were actively involved in setting up new businesses but which were not completely operational yet. In order for participants to qualify for the research, they were expected to be women above 18 years old and actively involved in venture development and use of digital media for conducting their businesses. Women running firms in the following industries were selected for this study: food processing, fashion and clothing, beauty and personal care products, retail trade, among others..

3.5 Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

The study made use of stratified random sampling since it would provide adequate representation of women nascent entrepreneurs within various business sectors and geographic locations in Zanzibar. Stratified sampling was deemed suitable since women entrepreneurs work in various business sectors and geographic locations characterized by diverse levels of platform usage and entrepreneurial experience. As such, the population was first stratified based on business sectors and geographic locations. The major business sectors involved in this study were food and beverages, fashion and clothing, beauty and personal care, retail, and service businesses. After stratification, respondents were then selected proportionally from each stratum through simple random sampling.

The sample size in this research was computed based on the requirements of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Hair et al. (2022) argue that research involving PLS-SEM requires an appropriate sample size which is adequate for providing statistical power, stability of parameter estimates, and model prediction ability. Considering the complexity of the proposed model and latent constructs used in this study, a sample size of 260 respondents was considered sufficient for ensuring the minimum statistical power level of 0.80.

3.6 Data Collection Instrument

The primary data for this study was collected through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire had two parts. The first part of the questionnaire comprised questions on respondents' demographic and business profile, whereas the second part included constructs of the study. All the measurement items used in the survey were adopted from the previously used scales and modified as per the requirements of the study. Respondents were required to respond to all the questions through a five-point Likert scale varying from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree. Online Customer Interaction was measured using the adapted items from Hammad and El Naggar (2023) and Swartz et al. (2022). Online Networking was measured using the adapted scales from Moetse (2019) and Hammad and El Naggar (2023). Digital Marketing was measured using the adopted items from Ahmed et al. (2026) and Adewusi et al. (2020). Opportunity Recognition was measured using the adopted indicators from Nambisan (2017) and Davidsson and Gruenhagen (2021).

3.7 Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis involved the use of PLS-SEM via SmartPLS 4. This method was used considering the fact that it is best suited for predictive studies, dealing with more complicated research designs and its robust nature in the analysis of data that may not conform to normality assumptions (Hair et al., 2022). Data analysis involved a two-step process. The first step entailed testing the measurement model with the use of indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE) and discriminant validity through Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). The second step involved testing the structural model with the use of bootstrapping analysis with 5,000 resamples to test the significance of the relationships among the research constructs. The coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2) and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) were further tested.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was sought from the necessary research body prior to data collection. The study was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality, anonymity, and freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without fear of retribution were guaranteed to all participants. All the information gathered was solely meant for academic use and stored securely.

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IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Respondent Profile

Questionnaires were distributed and returned to a total of 260 women who were newly founded entrepreneurs working in Zanzibar. This was a 100 percent response rate of participants. Respondents came from different sectors of businesses including food and beverages, beauty and personal care, fashion and clothing, retailing and services firms. The results concerning the age distribution of respondents showed that the largest share of them (42.3%) was 26-35 years old and followed by those 18-25 years old (32.7%). Respondents from 36 to 45 years old comprised 20.4 percent of respondents and those older than 46 years old amounted to 4.6 percent of them. It can be stated that women entrepreneurship in Zanzibar is characterized by young economic agents.

In respect of respondents' education level, the highest percentage of respondents held a secondary education (38.1%), followed by diplomas (29.6%). Those having only primary education made up 18.1% of respondents and those having Bachelor's degrees or higher accounted for 14.2%. The findings indicate that most women entrepreneurs possess at least basic formal education, which may facilitate the adoption and utilization of digital technologies in business operations.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 260)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18–25 years	85	32.7
	26–35 years	110	42.3
	36–45 years	53	20.4
	46 years and above	12	4.6
Education	Primary	47	18.1
	Secondary	99	38.1
	Diploma	77	29.6
	Bachelor's and above	37	14.2

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were performed to analyze the respondents' views on online customer interaction, online networking, digital marketing, and opportunity recognition for women nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar. The descriptive statistics concentrated on the mean values and standard deviations of the research constructs. The mean value was used as an indicator of the level of agreement among respondents, whereas the standard deviation was used to measure the extent of variability in their responses. Given that all the constructs were measured on a scale of 1-5 (from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree), the mean values exceeding 3.50 were taken as evidence of positive perception of the constructs.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 260)

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Online Customer Interaction	4.12	0.71	High
Online Networking	4.08	0.68	High
Digital Marketing	4.15	0.66	High
Opportunity Recognition	4.19	0.63	High
Overall Mean	**4.14**	**0.67**	**High**

According to Table 2, all the constructs were characterized by quite high means, which suggests that the importance of digital platforms in support of entrepreneurship was seen by most of the respondents as significant in the context of venture creation. The highest mean score is obtained by the Opportunity Recognition (M = 4.19, SD = 0.63), which suggests that respondents believed that digital technologies help them recognize new opportunities for business and make decisions based on the market requirements and preferences. The second highest mean score belongs to the Digital Marketing construct (M = 4.15, SD = 0.66), which implies that women entrepreneurs widely use digital technology to advertise their products and services, get visible and attract more customers.

Further, the Online Customer Interaction construct was also evaluated quite highly (M = 4.12, SD = 0.71), which implies that respondents interact with their customers via digital platforms, as well as use this opportunity to get feedback from the clients and build better relationships. Finally, Online Networking is characterized by a relatively high mean

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score (M = 4.08, SD = 0.68).Considering the low value of standard deviations within all constructs, there is uniformity in the views of the respondents about the extent of variability of their perceptions on the role played by digital platforms in entrepreneurial support.

From the above discussion, one can conclude that digital platforms are viewed by women nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar as vital tools for engaging customers, networking, marketing, and opportunity recognition. It can also be concluded that the use of digital technologies plays an important supportive role during the venture creation process by ensuring information, customer, and entrepreneurial opportunity access. This information serves as initial confirmation of the hypothesized relationships between study variables.

4.3 Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was measured in order to ensure the reliability and validity of the latent constructs prior to evaluating the structural relationship between the variables. PLS-SEM measurement model assessment is one of the key steps in the process of measuring the quality of the observed indicators. In line with the recommendations, the measurement model assessment was conducted in order to determine internal consistency reliability, indicator reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity. For the purpose of internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) were used, while for the purpose of convergent validity, indicator loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were utilized.

All constructs exhibited satisfactory level of internal consistency reliability. Cronbach's alpha values were found to range between 0.851 and 0.860, exceeding the required threshold of 0.70. Similarly, CR values ranged between 0.897 and 0.905, which is well above the minimum acceptable value of 0.70. Therefore, it can be stated that the indicators exhibit high degree of internal consistency. Convergent validity was checked by Average Variance Extracted (AVE). It checks the degree of how a construct can explain the variance of its indicators. The AVEs should be above 0.50 for establishing satisfactory convergent validity. The results show that all constructs have AVEs between 0.636 and 0.705. In other words, more than 50 percent of the variance in the indicators can be explained by their respective latent variables. Hence, convergent validity is established for all constructs of the research.

Table 3

Reliability and Convergent Validity Results

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
Online Customer Interaction	0.857	0.897	0.636
Online Networking	0.851	0.899	0.691
Digital Marketing	0.855	0.902	0.697
Opportunity Recognition	0.860	0.905	0.705

Source: SmartPLS Output (2026)

The results presented in Table 3 demonstrate that all constructs satisfy the recommended thresholds for reliability and convergent validity. Specifically, Cronbach's alpha values exceeded 0.70, Composite Reliability values surpassed 0.70, and AVE values were above 0.50. These findings confirm that the measurement model possesses satisfactory psychometric properties and is suitable for further analysis.

Indicator reliability was further assessed by examining the outer loadings of individual measurement items. It recommends that indicator loadings should exceed 0.708 to demonstrate that individual items adequately represent their respective latent constructs. The findings indicate that all indicators achieved loading values above the recommended threshold, ranging from 0.810 to 0.893. This suggests that all items contributed significantly to the measurement of their corresponding constructs and no indicator required deletion.

Table 4

Indicator Loadings

Construct	Indicator	Loading
Online Customer Interaction	OCI1	0.872
	OCI2	0.846
	OCI3	0.891
	OCI4	0.862
Online Networking	ON1	0.883
	ON2	0.870
	ON3	0.854
	ON4	0.821
Digital Marketing	DM1	0.889

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	DM2	0.859
	DM3	0.880
	DM4	0.842
Opportunity Recognition	OR1	0.893
	OR2	0.865
	OR3	0.887
	OR4	0.844

Source: SmartPLS Output (2026)

Results from the indicator loading show that all measurement items have provided satisfactory construct representation. Since all the loadings were above the threshold of 0.708, the indicators were reliable and added substantial value to the measurement model. Thus, all the items were considered for further analysis in the structural model. All in all, evaluation of the measurement model proves that the study constructs have sufficient reliability and convergent validity. Satisfactory outcomes achieved through Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability, AVE, and indicator loading support the notion that the measurement model is reliable enough to examine the relationships between online customer interaction, online networking, digital marketing, and opportunity recognition..

4.4 Discriminant Validity Assessment

Discriminant validity was tested in order to check if the constructs employed in the study were empirically different from each other. For discriminant validity in partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), the distinctiveness of the construct in question lies in its ability to measure something that cannot be measured by any other construct within the model. Discriminant validity was tested by means of the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) of correlations. This method is one of the most effective ways to test discriminant validity due to its accuracy of estimates.

Table 5

Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

Construct	**Online Customer Interaction**	**Online Networking**	**Digital Marketing**	**Opportunity Recognition**
Online Customer Interaction	-			
Online Networking	0.74	-		
Digital Marketing	0.81	0.68	-	
Opportunity Recognition	0.78	0.75	0.72	-

Source: SmartPLS Output (2026)

Recommended HTMT values must fall below 0.85 when dealing with conceptually distinct constructs while 0.90 is the acceptable threshold in less stringent cases. The results provided in Table 5 show that all HTMT values fall between 0.68 and 0.81, thus, falling below the acceptable level of 0.85. This means that the constructs under analysis are distinctive enough and there are no discriminant validity issues. Specifically, the highest HTMT value between Online Customer Interaction and Digital Marketing equals to 0.81. This shows that there is some degree of association between the constructs yet it still remains within the acceptable range. There is an HTMT value of 0.78 between Online Customer Interaction and Opportunity Recognition showing that even though the constructs are somehow associated, they measure different constructs. In addition, HTMT values of 0.75, 0.72, and 0.68 between Online Networking and Opportunity Recognition, Digital Marketing and Opportunity Recognition, and Online Networking and Digital Marketing respectively are all below the threshold..

All the values of HTMT are found to be below the threshold value of 0.85, which means that there is satisfactory discriminant validity. This implies that Online Customer Interaction, Online Networking, Digital Marketing and Opportunity Recognition are distinct constructs and measure different aspects of entrepreneurship behavior. It means that the measurement model satisfies the discriminant validity criteria. In order to strengthen the validity of the measurement model, Fornell-Larcker criteria were also analyzed. The results showed that the square root of AVE for each construct is greater than its correlations with other constructs, and hence discriminant validity is confirmed. All in all, the results from both HTMT and Fornell-Larcker criteria imply that the measurement model is distinct and satisfies the recommended criteria for PLS-SEM. The diagonal values shown in bold represent the square roots of the AVE for each construct. Since all diagonal values are greater than the corresponding inter-construct correlations, the Fornell-Larcker criterion is satisfied, further confirming discriminant validity among the study variables.

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Table 6
Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Construct	OCI	ON	DM	OR
Online Customer Interaction (OCI)	0.798			
Online Networking (ON)	0.621	0.831		
Digital Marketing (DM)	0.683	0.574	0.835	
Opportunity Recognition (OR)	0.651	0.638	0.603	0.840

Source: SmartPLS Output (2026)

4.5 Structural Model Assessment

Following the confirmation of the reliability and validity of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated to examine the hypothesized relationships among the study constructs. The assessment involved examining collinearity statistics and testing the significance of the proposed relationships between Online Customer Interaction, Online Networking, Digital Marketing, and Opportunity Recognition.

4.5.1 Collinearity Assessment

Based on the collinearity analysis results, it is observed that the predictor constructs had acceptable values for VIF between 2.118 and 2.764. From these results, it can be argued that there was no existence of multicollinearity and the predictors were independently explaining the Opportunity Recognition. The results confirm that the predictor variables are sufficiently independent and suitable for inclusion in the structural model analysis.

Table 7
Collinearity Assessment (VIF)

Predictor Construct	Endogenous Construct	VIF
Online Customer Interaction	Opportunity Recognition	2.764
Online Networking	Opportunity Recognition	2.118
Digital Marketing	Opportunity Recognition	2.436

Source: SmartPLS Output (2026)

4.5.2 Hypothesis Testing

Findings show that all the three hypotheses showed a positive and significant relationship. Online Customer Interaction had a positive influence on Opportunity Recognition ($\beta = 0.342$, $t = 4.098$, $p < 0.001$). From this, it can be noted that engagement with customers online contributes to increasing opportunity recognition ability. This is because women entrepreneurs will be able to realize their customers' needs and demands. In such case, Hypothesis 1 is therefore supported.

Online Entrepreneurial Networking had a positive and significant influence on Opportunity Recognition ($\beta = 0.318$, $t = 3.670$, $p < 0.001$). From this finding, we can understand that online networking helps entrepreneurs get relevant information and business knowledge. This makes it easier for entrepreneurs to be able to recognize their business opportunities. For that reason, Hypothesis 2 was supported. Digital Marketing also had a positive influence on Opportunity Recognition ($\beta = 0.287$, $t = 3.646$, $p < 0.001$). From this finding, it is clear that digital marketing improves entrepreneurs' knowledge on customers' preferences. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported. Results show that Online Customer Interaction is the most significant predictor of Opportunity Recognition, while Online Networking and Digital Marketing follow in second and third place respectively. It can be seen that customer interaction through online platforms is quite significant for women entrepreneurs in recognizing opportunities. The overall results provide empirical evidence of how digital platform based activities contribute in opportunity recognition for women nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar.

Table 8
Structural Model Results and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t-value	p-value
H1	Online Customer Interaction → Opportunity Recognition	0.342	4.098	<0.001
H2	Online Networking → Opportunity Recognition	0.318	3.670	<0.001
H3	Digital Marketing → Opportunity Recognition	0.287	3.646	<0.001

Source: SmartPLS Output (2026)

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4.6 Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

The coefficient of determination (R^2) was used to measure the degree of explanatory power of the structural model. According to the results, it was evident that Opportunity Recognition received an R^2 of 0.662, implying that Online Customer Interaction, Online Networking, and Digital Marketing together account for 66.2% of the variability in Opportunity Recognition among female nascent entrepreneurs in Zanzibar. The implication from the results is that the independent variables used in the model play a vital role in explaining entrepreneurial opportunity recognition. From this point, one can argue that women entrepreneurs who are involved in customer interaction, engage in online networks, and make use of digital marketing are more able to recognize, evaluate, and exploit business opportunities when creating new ventures.

Additionally, the findings suggest that digital technologies act as important mediums for women entrepreneurs to obtain market information, customer interaction, entrepreneurial networks, and trends in business. Thus, the mentioned features increase the capacity of women to identify new opportunities and make appropriate entrepreneurial decisions. Hence, the model provides enough evidence that digital platforms help considerably to ensure opportunity recognition in the nascent phases of venture creation. However, while a great amount of variance in Opportunity Recognition was accounted for by the model, about 33.8 percent was left unaccounted. This indicates the presence of some additional variables, which affect opportunity recognition among women entrepreneurs but are not taken into account in this study. Some of such variables might be entrepreneurial orientation, innovation capability, digital literacy, financial access, institutional support, experience in business, and environment, among others. Despite this, the obtained value of R^2 proves that the model is rather explanatory and can be used in order to understand the impact of digital platform activities on entrepreneurial opportunity recognition in Zanzibar..

Table 9

Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Endogenous Construct	Predictor Variables	R^2 Value
Opportunity Recognition	Online Customer Interaction, Online Networking, Digital Marketing	0.662

Source: SmartPLS Output (2026)

4.7 Effect Size (f^2) and Predictive Relevance (Q^2)

Besides establishing the importance of the structural relationships, it is necessary to establish the practical contribution of the predictors as well as the predictive ability of the model. In PLS-SEM, the effect size (f^2) is used to determine the degree to which an exogenous construct influences the endogenous construct while predictive relevance (Q^2) is used to gauge the predictive ability of the model. The effect size (f^2) was established to determine the relative contribution of Online Customer Interaction, Online Networking and Digital Marketing in Opportunity Recognition. Based on the guidelines provided by Cohen (1988), f^2 of 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 represent small, medium and large effect respectively. The result shows that the largest relative contribution of the predictors was made by Online Customer Interaction ($f^2 = 0.196$), followed by Online Networking ($f^2 = 0.173$) and then Digital Marketing ($f^2 = 0.148$). The findings imply that all the predictors contribute substantially to the explanation of Opportunity Recognition with Online Customer Interaction having the most influence of the three.

These results suggest that engagement by customers through digital platforms is instrumental in helping women entrepreneurs gain important market information to identify entrepreneurial opportunities. Equally, online networking helps entrepreneurs gain access to relevant information and business knowledge that is instrumental in helping them discover entrepreneurial opportunities. Even though the impact size of Digital Marketing was the smallest among all the predictors, it is still critical because it increases market visibility and helps to understand customer preferences and market trends. Overall, these findings show that the activities related to digital platforms significantly help women nascent entrepreneurs recognize entrepreneurial opportunities in Zanzibar.

For assessing predictive relevance, the Stone-Geisser Q^2 statistic was computed using the blindfolding method. According to Hair et al. (2022), models have predictive relevance where Q^2 values are greater than zero. The results indicate that the Q^2 value for Opportunity Recognition is 0.412, which is far greater than zero. Therefore, this implies that the structural model has high predictive relevance and can accurately predict the endogenous construct with the predictors included. The positive and relatively high Q^2 value indicates that the model not only explains the relationships among the constructs but also demonstrates satisfactory predictive capability. This suggests that Online Customer Interaction, Online Networking, and Digital Marketing provide meaningful information for predicting Opportunity Recognition among women nascent entrepreneurs. Therefore, the proposed model can be considered both explanatory and predictive in nature, strengthening its usefulness for understanding digital entrepreneurship within the Zanzibar context.

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Table 10
Effect Size (f^2) Results

Relationship	f^2 Value
Online Customer Interaction → Opportunity Recognition	0.196
Online Networking → Opportunity Recognition	0.173
Digital Marketing → Opportunity Recognition	0.148

Source: SmartPLS Output (2026)

4.8 Discussion

The main purpose of this research was to analyze the impact of digital platform related tasks on opportunity recognition of nascent women entrepreneurs in Zanzibar. In particular, the impact of Online Customer Interaction, Online Networking and Digital Marketing on Opportunity Recognition were analyzed. It was found that all three variables have a positive and statistically significant impact on Opportunity Recognition, indicating that the use of digital platforms is extremely important for nascent women entrepreneurs to recognize business opportunities.

The result reveals that Online Customer Interaction had the most impact on Opportunity Recognition. This means that female entrepreneurs who engage in online customer interaction have an easier time identifying customer demands and preferences and hence discovering new opportunities for doing business. The finding supports the propositions of the Digital Entrepreneurship Theory that says that use of digital technologies can help in entrepreneurial learning because of increased access to market information and customer insights gained through interactions. The finding is consistent with the results presented by Hammad and El Naggar (2023), which indicate that engagement in customer interactions on digital platforms helps entrepreneurs identify more entrepreneurial opportunities because of the knowledge exchange and market intelligence gathering capabilities. In line with the same, Swartz et al. (2022) found out that entrepreneurs who engage in online customer interactions have an easier time in recognizing and exploiting new business opportunities. The finding is also consistent with that of Churk (2023), which indicated that social media interactions improve business awareness and entrepreneurial empowerment of women entrepreneurs in Tanzania.

Additionally, Online Networking has been found to have a positive and significant impact on Opportunity Recognition. This is an indication that being part of digital entrepreneurial networks makes women entrepreneurs have access to information, resources, mentoring, and support systems that make it possible to recognize opportunities. As a result of being engaged in online networking, entrepreneurs have different viewpoints, market trends, and experiences in entrepreneurship that increase their knowledge of business environment and opportunities. This result has reinforced the core assumptions of the Social Capital theory that stresses on the role of social networks and relationships in gaining access to entrepreneurial resources. This result is in line with the findings of Moetse (2019), who has revealed that digital technology makes it possible to engage in extensive networking by making women entrepreneurs connect to wider entrepreneurial networks. In the same vein, Hammad and El Naggar (2023) found that online social capital plays a key role in making it possible to recognize opportunities through provision of resources and information sharing. Additionally, this result is supported by the studies of Ndandani (2022) and Mashapure et al. (2025).

It was also noted that Digital Marketing has a positive and significant effect on Opportunity Recognition. This implies that female entrepreneurs who embrace digital marketing techniques are able to observe market trends, customer behavior, and opportunities to do business. With digital marketing, entrepreneurs can obtain market intelligence using customer engagement metrics and consumer behavior data, and hence they can make entrepreneurial decisions. This implies that apart from being a promotional tool, digital marketing is also an entrepreneurial learning tool and opportunity identification platform. The finding agrees with the findings of Ahmed et al. (2026), whereby it was noted that digitization creates more opportunities for entrepreneurship because it makes the market more visible and provides business intelligence. Similarly, Salamzadeh et al. (2024) found out that digital technologies allow women entrepreneurs to bypass market barriers and become more entrepreneurial. The finding also agrees with the findings of Mhlongo et al. (2024), where it was found out that digital marketing platforms make great contribution towards entrepreneurial growth and market access in Africa.

From the output of the coefficient of determination, it is evident that Online Customer Interaction, Online Networking, and Digital Marketing combined accounted for 66.2% of the variability of Opportunity Recognition. This outcome underscores the significant role played by the use of activities associated with digital platforms in influencing the perception of entrepreneurial opportunities amongst women nascent entrepreneurs. It can be observed that there is considerable explanatory power of the model in the sense that digital technologies play a significant role in empowering women entrepreneurs in terms of acquiring information, networking, interacting with customers, and identifying business opportunities.

However, the results of the study are especially important for Zanzibar in the sense that women entrepreneurs usually face the problem of working under resource and market constraints, as well as limitations in their entrepreneurial ecosystems. It seems that digital platforms become an alternative route by which female entrepreneurs can cope with

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the above-mentioned problems and have access to customers, information, and business networks. Thus, the obtained results indicate that digital technologies do not represent mere communication means but the sources of opportunities for entrepreneurs that help recognize these opportunities and create businesses. In other words, the promotion of digital literacy and digital entrepreneurship among women could play a pivotal role in entrepreneurial development.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The current research has focused on the contribution of digital platform activities to the process of opportunity recognition in case of nascent women entrepreneurs of Zanzibar. In particular, the research has analyzed the impact of Online Customer Interaction, Online Networking, and Digital Marketing on Opportunity Recognition. According to the results of the research, all the predictor variables have been found to have significant positive impact on Opportunity Recognition, which confirms the importance of using digital platforms for the process of opportunity identification in the process of venture creation.

Among all the predictor variables, Online Customer Interaction proved to be the most effective one, while Online Networking and Digital Marketing took the second and third place correspondingly. It can be stated that the use of online customer interaction, online networking and digital marketing helps women entrepreneurs to detect their needs and recognize the entrepreneurial opportunities. It is also worth noting that the combination of the three predictor variables accounted for a great share of the variance in Opportunity Recognition.

5.2 Recommendations

The research results emphasize the necessity for greater funding of digital entrepreneurship projects among women entrepreneurs in Zanzibar. Digital literacy and entrepreneurship trainings focusing on digital communication and marketing, customer engagement, and networking should be enhanced by government agencies, entrepreneurship development institutions, and developmental partners. The training programs would assist women entrepreneurs in taking full advantage of digital resources to collect information about the market, build networks and identify entrepreneurial opportunities. At the same time, special attention should be paid to improving digital infrastructure and ensuring access to the internet in order to involve women entrepreneurs in the digital economy and online business opportunities.

Moreover, women entrepreneurs should be motivated to engage with customers using digital technologies, be part of online entrepreneurial communities and develop digital marketing strategies based on information processing to recognize entrepreneurial opportunities. These activities can be facilitated by entrepreneurship development institutions through creating online networking platforms and business assistance services. Further research should pay attention to other factors affecting opportunity recognition among women entrepreneurs such as digital literacy, entrepreneurial orientation, innovativeness, financing, and institutional support.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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