

WHAT ARE THE SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE MANAGERIAL PERFORMANCE OF RURAL WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS?

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Abstract:

Women are considered to be an important human resource in South Africa, and every country should try to utilize them as mediators of economic growth and development. Sociocultural factors challenge them to achieve managerial performance. However, the literature focuses on sociocultural research for women in urban provinces of South Africa, neglecting rural women in KZN. On the other hand, sociocultural research usually overlooks the insufficient attention to the needs and challenges faced by women in their enterprises. This study aims to examine the factors influencing rural women's entrepreneurship performance in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). The study employed a qualitative approach, where open-ended semi-structured interviews were used as instruments for data collection. There were 26 questionnaires distributed to women entrepreneurs operating their businesses in rural KZN, specifically uMhlabuyalingana, eJozini and Big5Hlabisa. Thematic content analysis was the primary method utilized for analyzing the collected data. Findings reveal that these women demonstrate resilience and adaptability in managing business alongside family responsibilities. Strategic planning and conflict management are essential for overcoming challenges, although there is a need for leadership and financial management training. Sociocultural factors, including family responsibilities and varying levels of social support, play a significant role, while gender stereotypes continue to undermine their managerial abilities. Limited access to Technology hinders business growth, stressing the need for digital skills training to enhance efficiency, competitiveness, and market reach. Tailored support programs addressing these sociocultural and technological challenges are essential to enhancing rural women entrepreneurs' success and driving economic development in rural communities.

Keywords: Rural Women Entrepreneurs, Entrepreneurship Performance, Policy Development, Economic Growth, Support Mechanisms, Resource Access.

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship is recognized as a potent catalyst for societal and economic development (Mazzarol & Reboud, 2017), particularly in empowering women and advancing gender equality (Bozhikin, Macke, & da Costa, 2019). Encouraging and enhancing women's entrepreneurship is paramount for improving the South African economy, with small businesses led by women contributing significantly to economic activity and stability (Kamberidou, 2020). The role of women entrepreneurship in South Africa's economic progression is evident, with African-owned businesses constituting 42.6% of business operations and playing a crucial role in job creation and innovation through SMEs (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2021).



Despite these strides, South Africa still faces challenges in fully harnessing the potential of women entrepreneurs, as indicated by its lower performance compared to other African countries such as Botswana, Ghana and Uganda (The MasterCard Index, 2021). In KZN, women's entrepreneurship lags behind other provinces, with only an 8% contribution to GDP and a lower percentage of businesses owned by women compared to regions like the Western Cape and Gauteng (Business Partners, 2013). The growth potential of women-owned businesses in South Africa remains constrained by challenges such as limited access to education, skills, training and funds (Herrington, Kew, & Mwangi, 2017; Meyer, 2018; Stokes & Wilson, 2020). Likewise, cultural norms continue to impede the progress of women's entrepreneurship, with traditional perceptions of women's roles in society hindering their participation in business (McAdam, 2003). Gender inequality perpetuates these challenges, particularly in developing countries where women entrepreneurs face additional hurdles compared to their counterparts in developed nations (ILO, 2018; Meyer, 2018). Despite these obstacles, women entrepreneurs demonstrate resilience and determination in navigating the complexities of the business environment (Isaga, 2019). Addressing the multifaceted challenges facing women entrepreneurship in South Africa requires a concerted effort from policymakers, stakeholders and society. By promoting gender equality, enhancing access to education, skills development, financial resources and challenging cultural stereotypes, South Africa can unlock the full potential of women entrepreneurs, driving inclusive economic growth and sustainable development.

Following this introduction, the paper will present a review of the literature, followed by the theoretical framework upon which the research question hinges. Thereafter, the research methods used to collect and analyze the data will be discussed, and a presentation and discussion of the results and how they link to the literature will ensue. Finally, we shall present a conclusion drawn from the results and areas for further research.

This literature review explores key themes and determinants shaping the entrepreneurial journey of rural women, with a focus on their resilience, creativity, visionary leadership, and risk-taking abilities. It examines the intersection of family responsibilities and work conflicts, the pervasive influence of gender roles and stereotypes, and the critical role of technological skills and innovation in enhancing entrepreneurial capabilities. Additionally, it highlights the importance of social support, resources, and networking in overcoming structural barriers while addressing the persistent challenges of managerial, leadership, and networking skills development. By synthesizing insights from various studies, this review underscores the complex interplay of sociocultural, economic, and technological factors that shape the entrepreneurial landscape for rural women and offers a foundation for further research and policy intervention to support their empowerment and success.

Characteristics of rural women entrepreneurs. Rural women entrepreneurs demonstrate resilience by leveraging limited resources, including household savings and borrowing from informal sources, to sustain and grow their businesses despite financial challenges (Mashapure et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2022). Their determination to balance family needs with business pursuits underscores their commitment to entrepreneurship despite facing societal barriers and gender inequality (Ayala & Manzano, 2014). Despite these challenges, rural women entrepreneurs contribute significantly to the economy and drive socioeconomic development (Tundui & Tundui, 2020). Their resilience enables them to overcome disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, by innovating and adapting to provide their families with limited resources (Santoro et al., 2020).

Creativity. Rural women entrepreneurs demonstrate creativity by leveraging limited resources to develop innovative solutions and products tailored to market demands (Tekola &



Gidey, 2019). They operate small home businesses, using low-cost materials and developing products needed by their communities (Sullivan & Meek, 2012). Despite lacking the skills to utilize natural resources for business effectively, these entrepreneurs find ways to overcome challenges and develop successful enterprises (Nivetha et al., 2019).

Visionaries. Rural women entrepreneurs exhibit visionary leadership by understanding their communities' needs and challenges and envisioning opportunities for business growth (Deepa, Rani, & Radhika, 2022). Their deep knowledge of local markets enables them to identify market gaps and create business opportunities to alleviate poverty in their communities.

Risk-Takers. Rural women entrepreneurs display a moderate propensity for risk-taking as they embark on entrepreneurial ventures despite uncertainties and challenges (Cantillon, 1775; Sexton & Bowman, 1986). Their willingness to take calculated risks distinguishes them from employed workers and contributes to their entrepreneurial success.

Rural women's family responsibilities and work conflict influence managerial performance. The intersection of family responsibilities and work conflict significantly influences the managerial performance of women entrepreneurs, particularly in rural settings. Historically, societal norms relegated women to domestic roles, constraining their economic participation (Meyer & Keys, 2019). Challenges persist, as evidenced by contemporary research in Indonesia highlighting work-family conflicts, such as the "Job Spouse conflict," reflecting the competition between entrepreneurial and familial roles (Prabawanti & Rusli, 2022; Kim & Ling, 2001). This conflict necessitates robust social support mechanisms to mitigate its adverse effects on business performance (Prabawanti & Rusli, 2022).

Moreover, family responsibilities impede women's access to education and skills development crucial for managerial success, exacerbating work-family conflicts (Srivastava, 2017; Nasir, Iqbal, & Akhtar, 2019). Their limited availability during standard business hours hampers engagement with clients, networking and attending essential meetings (Tayal & Melta, 2023). These challenges contribute to stress, burnout and compromised decision-making, adversely affecting business performance. Conversely, while some argue that entrepreneurship offers flexibility for balancing work and family obligations (Kirkwood & Tootell, 2008; Fritsch et al., 2019), others highlight the disparity in women's managerial skills and motivations in South Africa, complicating the relationship between family responsibilities and entrepreneurship (Okeke-Uzodike, 2019).

Gender roles and stereotype influence on rural women entrepreneurship managerial performance. Gender stereotypes portray entrepreneurship as a male-dominated field, leading to the underestimation of women's abilities and restricting their access to markets, partnerships and industry events (Panda, 2018). Consequently, women entrepreneurs face substantial impediments in business performance as they are confined to traditional roles and responsibilities dictated by culture and societal norms (Matiwane, 2019). While some women seize entrepreneurial opportunities to support their families, they encounter challenges in balancing business and family responsibilities (Irene, 2016). This stereotype associated with culture has resulted in women not leveraging entrepreneurship opportunities and being discouraged from taking risks in entrepreneurship (Adom & Anambane, 2019). Despite these challenges, cultural stereotypes also present opportunities for women to capitalize on entrepreneurship (Aneke et al., 2021). However, navigating the dual roles of business owner and homemaker remains a significant challenge as family responsibilities consume a significant amount of time and attention (Carmichael & Mazonde, 2016). Overall, addressing traditional gender inequalities and stereotypes is crucial for enhancing the managerial performance of rural women entrepreneurs in South Africa.

Technological skills in rural women entrepreneurs. Technology plays a crucial role in shaping the managerial performance of rural women entrepreneurs, yet many face challenges due to the lack of technological skills and advancements in rural areas (Abd Rani & Hashim, 2015). In today's digital age, digital literacy skills are no longer optional but essential for success (Yadav, Paliwal, & Chatradhi, 2022). Digitalization offers opportunities for women-owned businesses to market themselves, utilize modern telecommunication infrastructure and integrate into broader markets (Yadav, Paliwal, & Chatradhi, 2022). Exposure to Technology empowers rural women with tools to enhance their managerial skills and competencies (Melhem et al., 2009). Access to smartphones, computers and internet connectivity enables women to access information, participate in online courses and engage in training programs, ultimately improving their managerial performance (Melhem et al., 2009).

Technological innovation for rural women entrepreneurs. Technological innovation holds significant potential to transform the activities of rural women entrepreneurs, offering them enhanced access to information and resources crucial for managerial performance (Yadav, Paliwal, & Chatradhi, 2022). On the other hand, Mishra et al. (2019) highlight how technological innovation can provide essential tools, such as computer systems, to manage various aspects of business performance, including human resources, finances and safety monitoring, thereby ensuring sustainability. Additionally, Adikaram and Razik (2022) view technological innovation as an opportunity to expand market share, while Mishra et al. (2019) emphasize its role in facilitating customer engagement, marketing, branding and sales. By leveraging Technology, rural women entrepreneurs can explore innovative approaches to managing customer relationships, conducting marketing activities online and streamlining sales processes through e-commerce platforms and sales systems.

Technological adoption and use in rural women entrepreneurs. Technological adoption among rural women entrepreneurs faces numerous challenges rooted in societal norms and gender stereotypes. Onoshakpor, Etuknwa, and Karamalla-Gaiballa (2020) highlight that only a small percentage of women venture into technology-based businesses in South Africa, with societal perceptions associating technology entrepreneurship with masculinity. Similarly, Mishra et al. (2019) found a significant technology adoption gap between male and female farmers in Uganda, with female farmers lagging. This pattern is echoed by Fisher and Kandiwa (2014), who observed lower rates of technology adoption among female farmers in Malawi compared to their male counterparts. Quaye et al. (2021) attribute gender differences in technology adoption to factors such as accessibility, sociocultural norms, and technological characteristics. Doss et al. (2018) further emphasize that female farmers often face limited access to information about Technology due to specific sociocultural barriers. These challenges hinder rural women entrepreneurs from fully embracing and leveraging Technology to enhance their businesses and managerial performance.

The use of Technology for networking by rural women entrepreneurs. Networking presents a significant challenge for rural women entrepreneurs compared to their male counterparts, who often have broader and more established networks due to their previous professional experiences (Robinson and Stubberud, 2009). While men can draw on extensive databases, including professionals like lawyers, taxpayers and accountants, women entrepreneurs often rely solely on their husbands, friends and family for networking opportunities (Robinson and Stubberud, 2009). This limited access to networks impedes the potential for women entrepreneurs to achieve performance and growth as networking facilitates crucial connections such as contracts, investors, suppliers, financing and logistical support (Ribeiro et al., 2021). Additionally, the lack of networking and support systems among rural women entrepreneurs hampers skills development and problem-

solving, exacerbating the psychological impact of balancing family and business responsibilities (Seshibedi, 2021). These challenges underscore the importance of implementing supportive policies and empowerment strategies to address the unique needs of rural women entrepreneurs. Notwithstanding the advantages offered by technological digitalization, rural women face barriers such as high costs and the limited availability of modern Technology (Yadav, Paliwal, and Chatradhi, 2022). However, even when Technology is accessible, internet and network limitations remain significant bottlenecks for women entrepreneurs in rural areas, hindering their ability to leverage Technology for business purposes.

Social support influence in rural women entrepreneurs. Social support plays a crucial role in the growth and survival of women entrepreneurs, providing them with psychological resources and aiding in their work-family balance (Klyver, Honig and Steffens, 2018). It encompasses support from family, friends and community members, offering encouragement, positive attitudes and emotional backing (French et al., 2018; Edelman et al., 2016). Family support acts as a vital source of encouragement during challenging times, helping entrepreneurs maintain momentum and solve problems (Hilbrecht, 2016). Engaging in entrepreneurial activities involves risk-taking and stress, making family support essential for reducing work conflict and enabling women to perform effectively in their businesses (Neneh, 2017). In regions characterized by sociocultural factors, such as India, social support serves as an emotional instrument for rural women entrepreneurs to continue their entrepreneurial journey (Sehgal and Khandelwal, 2020).

Additionally, in environments with deficient institutional support, family support becomes even more crucial for fostering entrepreneurial activities (Xheneti, Madden, and Thapa Karki, 2019). Tangible social support, such as financial assistance from family members and intangible support, including advice and mentoring, form a supportive network that facilitates the competitive advantage of women entrepreneurs (Mari, Poggesi, and De Vita, 2016). Community support can also serve as a customer base for rural women entrepreneurs, promoting their products and services through word of mouth and other means of communication (Kapinga and Montero, 2017). However, challenges such as the lack of experience and business knowledge among rural women entrepreneurs may hinder their ability to leverage community support effectively (Rahman et al., 2023). Nonetheless, social support remains a crucial factor in empowering women entrepreneurs and driving the performance of their businesses.

Determinants of managerial performance in rural women entrepreneurship. Various determinants, including resources, managerial skills, strategic skills, technical skills and digital marketing strategies, influence performance in rural women entrepreneurship.

Resources. Sociocultural norms and gender roles may restrict women's access to financial resources and education, limiting their ability to invest in their businesses and acquire the necessary skills (OECD, 2017). Additionally, cultural expectations regarding women's roles may affect their access to familial and community support, which are important non-financial resources for business development (Mishra, 2020).

Managerial Skills. Societal expectations and gender stereotypes may affect the opportunities available for women to develop managerial skills through education and training. Cultural norms regarding women's roles in decision-making and leadership may hinder their ability to acquire and apply managerial skills effectively (Brixiová, Kangoye, & Said, 2020).

Strategic Skills: Sociocultural factors can influence women's entrepreneurial orientation by shaping their attitudes towards risk-taking, innovation and proactiveness. Cultural norms that discourage women from taking risks or pursuing innovative ventures may limit their entrepreneurial orientation and strategic skills development (Fuentes-Fuentes et al., 2015).

Technical Skills Societal attitudes towards women's education and employment may impact their access to technical education and training. Cultural beliefs about women's capabilities in technical fields may contribute to a lack of emphasis on developing technical skills among rural women entrepreneurs (OECD, 2017).

Digital Marketing Strategies. Sociocultural factors such as internet connectivity, access to Technology and cultural norms regarding women's online presence may influence the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies for rural women entrepreneurs. Cultural attitudes toward women's participation in online activities and social media usage may affect their ability to leverage digital marketing tools effectively (Omar et al., 2020).

Challenges facing rural women entrepreneurs to achieve managerial performance; Rural Women Entrepreneurship Business Managerial Skills. Rural women entrepreneurs face significant challenges in developing and applying managerial skills, which are essential for the success and sustainability of their businesses. These challenges include limited access to resources, such as finance and assets, as well as a lack of supportive environments for women's entrepreneurship in South Africa (Mandongwe & Jaravaza, 2020). Moreover, statistics from GEM (2021) reveal a stark gender disparity in business establishment, with only 4% of women establishing businesses compared to 7% of men. Given that a significant number of rural women start small businesses, effective managerial skills are crucial for navigating the competitive business environment (Mozumdar et al., 2020). These skills are particularly vital in sectors such as trading, handicrafts and catering, where rural women often operate (Ghouse, Durrah, & McElwee, 2021).

Rural Women Entrepreneurship Leadership Skills. Leadership skills are another area of concern for rural women entrepreneurs, with limited opportunities for skills development and gender biases hindering their advancement. Despite efforts to provide workshops and conferences for skills enhancement, rural women in South Africa still face obstacles to leadership development, including how to manage their finances, budgeting and inventory management (Qali, 2020). Gender biases and societal stereotypes contribute to these challenges, with traditional expectations placing women in domestic roles rather than leadership positions (Isaga, 2019). These stereotypes create barriers to rural women's acquisition and application of leadership skills, impacting their ability to lead and manage businesses effectively.

Rural Women Business Networking Skills. Networking poses significant challenges for rural women entrepreneurs, who often lack the extensive networks enjoyed by their male counterparts. While men typically benefit from prior professional experiences and broader connections, women entrepreneurs may rely solely on limited networks of family and friends (Robinson & Stubberud, 2009). This limitation hampers women's access to valuable business opportunities, such as contracts, investors and financing, which are essential for business growth (Ribeiro et al., 2021). Effective networking can provide strategic assistance and access to important business information, but rural women face barriers such as limited access to professional networks and poor networking infrastructure (Etim & Iwu, 2018; Isaga, 2019). Despite the potential benefits of online networking through social media, challenges such as expensive data tariffs and poor network infrastructure further hinder rural women's ability to connect with stakeholders (Alene, 2020).

Theoretical background. The theoretical underpinnings of this study are based on the literature on rural women's sociocultural factors and managerial performance. The study draws on the social capital theory, which posits that individuals who perceive greater support from their social networks are more likely to experience positive outcomes such as increased self-esteem and coping abilities (Taylor et al., 2015). In stable family environments, where strong social ties are prevalent, individuals are better equipped to achieve their educational and skills development goals (Kasim et



al., 2022). This highlights the importance of social support networks in fostering the growth and development of individuals, including rural women entrepreneurs. Gender differences in social capital distribution, as observed in foraging cultures, underscore the unique roles that social networks play for women and men. Women often benefit from close-knit networks that provide support for tasks like foraging and childcare, which can translate to support for entrepreneurial endeavors (Shen, 2020).

In contrast, men may thrive in larger networks that offer opportunities for wealth accumulation and social status. In organizational contexts, Swanson et al. (2020) demonstrate how interpersonal relationships and networks contribute to organizational success by fostering trust and respect among employees. This suggests that the quality of social support in an organization can significantly impact managerial performance.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) posits that adoption and perceived usefulness are key determinants of individuals' acceptance and adoption of new technologies (Alyouf, Lutfi, Alsubahi, Alhazmi, Al-Mugheed, Anshasi, & Albugami, 2023). The TAM further proposes that the acceptance and adoption of Technology are not only determined by individual perceptions but also by the social and organizational environment in which the Technology is used. The study applied TAM to understand rural women entrepreneurs' attitudes towards technology adoption and how technological innovations can help overcome sociocultural constraints to improve managerial performance.

METHODS

Research methods. The study employed a qualitative method focusing on sociocultural factors that influence rural women's entrepreneurship managerial performance in KZN. The participants were from uMhlabuyalingana, Big5Hlabisa and eJozini municipalities. The reason for this strategy was to conduct an in-depth exploration of rural women entrepreneur's experiences, perspectives and practices to provide detailed, deeper insights and data into the phenomenon under study, such as the unique sociocultural factors they face in different contexts.

The research approach was based on ethical issues, which necessitated obtaining ethical certification. Prior to participation, informed consent forms were issued to ensure that the participants fully understood the research objectives and implications, protecting confidentiality and anonymity.

Data collection. Open-ended semi-structured interviews with rural women entrepreneurs in specific areas of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) were utilized as a data collection tool, transcribed, coded and subjected to thematic analysis to identify common themes and sub-themes, aimed to deeply explore the influences on managerial performance within the rural women entrepreneurs. In addition to exploring participants' viewpoints, demographic data such as age, gender, position within the organization and years of experience were collected to provide context. Organized around themes such as sociocultural factors, managerial skills and training, Technology's role and available support mechanisms, the interviews generated rich qualitative data.

Thematic analysis, which involves themes and subthemes, was employed to dissect and interpret these insights systematically. Simple random sampling was used to maximize variation by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity of sociocultural factors of rural women entrepreneurs that influence their managerial performance. This process involves familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).



RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The dataset was thoroughly organized into distinct thematic groups reflecting various observed insights. Subsequently, these outlined categories were synthesized to demarcate three overarching thematic constructs: the leadership skills of rural women entrepreneurs, sociocultural influences, Technology for rural women entrepreneurs and/or rural women entrepreneurs, and determinants of managerial performance in rural women entrepreneurs.

Rural women entrepreneurship leadership skills; Change Management. Rural women entrepreneurs exhibit resilience, resourcefulness and a willingness to embrace change as they navigate the complexities of entrepreneurship. The determination to balance family needs with business pursuits underscores their commitment to entrepreneurship despite facing societal barriers and gender inequality (Ayala & Manzano, 2014). Their experiences underscore the importance of strategic planning, effective communication and continuous learning in driving business success. These findings are consistent with Isaga (2019), who opines that despite these obstacles, women entrepreneurs demonstrate resilience and determination in navigating the complexities of the business environment. As illuminated by the participants:

"...When our primary supplier unexpectedly shut down, it was a shock. We immediately went into problem-solving mode. First, we made sure our customers were aware of the situation and were transparent about what was happening. Then, internally, we rallied our team to brainstorm alternatives. We researched and reached out to potential new suppliers, assessing their reliability and quality. Once we found suitable replacements, we worked closely with them to ensure a smooth transition, maintaining the trust and satisfaction of our customers throughout the process."

"...For me, expanding our product line was a significant step for our business. We knew it would require careful planning and execution to minimize any negative impact on our operations. So, we began by conducting thorough market research to understand customer preferences and identify potential gaps in the market. We also sought feedback directly from our existing customers to gauge their interest in new products. Based on this information, we developed a phased approach to introducing new items, starting with a small selection and gradually expanding based on demand. This gradual rollout helped us manage inventory and production effectively while maintaining the integrity of our brand."

Conflict Management. There is a need for tailored support programs, and resources focused on enhancing managerial skills among rural women entrepreneurs. These programs could include training workshops on budgeting, inventory management techniques and leadership development. The findings agree with the literature that despite efforts to provide workshops and conferences for skills enhancement, rural women in South Africa still face obstacles to leadership development, including how to manage their finances, budgeting and inventory management (Qali, 2020). As participants responded:

"...the toughest part of managing my business has been dealing with inventory management. Sometimes, it is hard to predict how much stock we will need, and we end up either running out of products or having too much left over. I have had to develop better systems for tracking inventory levels and ordering supplies to avoid these issues."

Sociocultural influences; Subtheme 1: family responsibilities and work conflict. The importance of support networks and resources in facilitating the integration of family responsibilities with entrepreneurial pursuits for rural women is crucial for their managerial performance. The literature mentioned that challenges of rural women persist, as evidenced by contemporary research in Indonesia highlighting work-family conflicts, such as the "Job Spouse conflict," reflecting the competition between entrepreneurial and familial roles (Prabawanti & Rusli, 2022; Kim & Ling, 2001). This conflict necessitates robust social support mechanisms to mitigate its

adverse effects on business performance (Prabawanti & Rusli, 2022). These findings concur with those of the participants as illuminated:

"...family responsibilities? They are a big part of my life, you know. I have three kids running around, a household to manage, and on top of that, I am trying to run my business. It is a juggling act, for sure. Sometimes, I feel like I am pulled in a million directions at once, but I have learned to prioritize and ask for help when I need it."

"...Family responsibilities? Yeah, they are pretty important to me. I have got my hands full, taking care of my parents, my spouse, and our kids, not to mention running my business. It is a balancing act, but I have figured out ways to make it work. I have learned to set boundaries and

Social Support. Rural women entrepreneurs feel supported by their communities, while others face criticism and lack of assistance. Social support plays a crucial role in the growth and survival of women entrepreneurs, providing them with psychological resources and aiding in their work-family balance (Klyver, Honig, and Steffens, 2018). This shows that social support can vary widely among them. It is important to create environments where everyone feels encouraged and included. As participants responded:

The social support I have received from my community has been incredible. From encouraging words to practical help when needed, my neighbors and fellow entrepreneurs have really lifted me. It is like having a second family that's always there to cheer me on and lend a hand when things get tough. However, there is also a lot of jealousy and gossip. It feels like I am constantly being judged and criticized, which can be really disheartening. I wish I had a more positive and uplifting network to rely on." Because It is like everyone is out for themselves, and there is not much camaraderie among entrepreneurs. I have reached out for help before, but most people are too busy with their problems to lend a hand. It is tough trying to go it alone."

Stereotypes. The participants voiced frustration with stereotypes suggesting they lack managerial skills due to gender and rural backgrounds. This is confirmed by the literature, which states that women entrepreneurs face substantial impediments in business performance as they are confined to traditional roles and responsibilities dictated by culture and societal norms (Matiwane, 2019). Despite challenges in accessing resources, they are determined to prove themselves through hard work and education. These findings agreed with Aneke et al. (2021), who state that cultural stereotypes also present opportunities for women to capitalize on entrepreneurship. As participants articulated:

"...People often assume that because I am a rural woman entrepreneur, I do not have the skills or knowledge to manage my business effectively. However, that is just not true. I have worked hard to develop my managerial skills, and I am constantly learning and improving. It is frustrating when others underestimate me based on outdated stereotypes, but I use it as motivation to prove them wrong."

Technology for rural women entrepreneurs; Access to Technology. The limited access to Technology poses significant challenges for rural women entrepreneurs, impacting their ability to connect with suppliers and customers online. Access to smartphones, computers and internet connectivity enables women to access information, participate in online courses and engage in training programs, ultimately improving their managerial performance (Melhem et al., 2009). For example, traditional gender roles prioritize women's involvement in domestic duties rather than accessing Technology or participating in entrepreneurial activities. Additionally, cultural beliefs or societal attitudes undervalue the importance of technology adoption for women, leading to a lack of investment in infrastructure or resources to improve access. As a result, rural women entrepreneurs may face barriers in acquiring technological skills or utilizing digital platforms for business management, ultimately affecting their managerial performance.

"...Well, you know, in our community, access to Technology is quite limited. We rely mostly on traditional methods of communication and business operations. It can be challenging sometimes, especially when trying to reach customers outside of our immediate area. We do not have reliable internet or modern tools like in the cities. It affects my business because I cannot easily connect with suppliers or customers online. Sometimes, I feel like I am at a disadvantage compared to businesses in more urban areas." We are suppressed by domestic roles to fulfil at our homes, limiting even our time to be invested in Technology. However, we make do with what we have and try to adapt as best as we can."

"...Technology access is not something we have much of in our rural community. We mostly rely on word of mouth and face-to-face interactions for business. While it can be frustrating at times, especially when trying to compete with businesses in urban areas, I have learned to be resourceful and find creative ways to overcome these challenges."

Digital Skills Training. Digital skills training is seen as essential for rural women entrepreneurs to thrive in today's digital age. It highlights the potential benefits such training can bring, such as improving efficiency, expanding customer bases and accessing valuable resources online. This is concurred by Yadav, Paliwal and Chatradhi (2022), who state that in today's digital age, digital literacy skills are no longer optional but essential for success. Digitalization offers opportunities for women-owned businesses to market themselves, utilize modern telecommunication infrastructure and integrate into broader markets (Yadav, Paliwal & Chatradhi, 2022).

"...I believe digital skills training is crucial for rural women entrepreneurs because it opens a whole new world of opportunities. With proper training, we can learn how to use Technology to streamline our operations, reach a wider audience, and stay competitive in the market. It is like giving us the tools we need to thrive in today's digital age. Plus, learning new skills is empowering and can boost our confidence as business owners."

Utilization of Technology. While some are utilizing Technology to its fullest extent, others express a need for more guidance and resources to integrate Technology into their businesses effectively. This is because the findings in the literature (Onoshakpor, Etuknwa and Karamalla-Gaiballa, 2020) highlight that only a small percentage of women venture into technology-based businesses in South Africa, with societal perceptions associating technology entrepreneurship with masculinity. Similarly, Mishra et al. (2019) found a significant technology adoption gap between male and female farmers in Uganda, with female farmers lagging. This highlights the importance of providing tailored support and training programs to help rural women entrepreneurs enhance their digital skills and leverage Technology for business growth. These findings concurred with those by Seshibedi (2021), which revealed that the lack of networking and support systems among rural women entrepreneurs hampers skills development and problem-solving, exacerbating the psychological impact of balancing family and business responsibilities. Adikaram and Razik (2022) view technological innovation as an opportunity to expand market share, as illuminated by the participants:

"... Technology plays a significant role in my business. I use it for everything from marketing and advertising on social media to managing my finances with accounting software. It has been a game-changer for me, allowing me to reach a wider audience and streamline my operations. However, staying updated with the latest Technology, trends, and tools can be overwhelming at times. "

"...I wish I could say I use Technology extensively in my business, but the reality is that I struggle with it. I have a smartphone and use it for basic communication, but beyond that, I feel a bit lost. I know there are probably ways to improve my business with Technology, but I lack the skills and resources to do so effectively. "

Based on the evidence presented above, it is evident that there is a significant influence of sociocultural factors on the managerial performance of rural women entrepreneurs in various aspects. Despite facing challenges such as gender stereotypes, work-family conflicts and limited access to Technology, rural women entrepreneurs demonstrate resilience, resourcefulness and determination in navigating the complexities of entrepreneurship. Social support networks play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of these challenges, providing psychological resources and aiding in work-family balance. Moreover, there is a clear need for tailored support programs focused on enhancing managerial skills and digital literacy among rural women entrepreneurs to leverage Technology effectively for business growth. By addressing these sociocultural barriers and providing the necessary support, policymakers and stakeholders can empower rural women entrepreneurs to thrive and contribute to sustainable economic development in their communities.

CONCLUSION

The study investigated sociocultural factors influencing rural women's entrepreneurship managerial performance in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) using qualitative methodology. Rural women entrepreneurs exhibit resilience and adaptability in managing change in their businesses, yet tailored support programs are needed for further enhancement. Sociocultural influences, such as family responsibilities and social support networks, significantly impact their ability to manage and grow their businesses, highlighting the need for initiatives to challenge stereotypes and promote gender equality. The limited access to Technology poses challenges, emphasizing the importance of digital skills training and the utilization for competitiveness. Addressing these factors through tailored support programs can enhance rural women entrepreneurs' resilience and success, driving economic growth in rural communities. Access to Technology positively influences competitiveness, emphasizing the need for integrating new technologies to enhance business performance in today's digital age. Strengthening digital literacy and addressing sociocultural influences are crucial for unlocking the full potential of rural women entrepreneurs and fostering economic development.

Implications of the study. The study's qualitative approach provided rich and detailed insights, but the findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable to all rural settings or other regions. Additionally, the small sample size, typical of qualitative research, limits the scope of the results, and a larger, more diverse sample could yield broader perspectives. While the study highlighted the importance of Technology, it did not delve deeply into specific digital tools or platforms that could directly benefit rural women entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the focus on KwaZulu-Natal precludes cross-cultural comparisons, leaving an opportunity to explore how sociocultural influences vary across different rural areas in South Africa or other regions.

Limitations and directions for future research. The study highlights the critical need for tailored support programs to address sociocultural barriers such as family responsibilities, gender stereotypes, and limited social support networks that affect rural women entrepreneurs' managerial performance. Policymakers should prioritize initiatives that promote gender equality, mentorship, and community engagement to create a more enabling entrepreneurial environment. Furthermore, integrating digital literacy training and access to Technology can enhance competitiveness, operational efficiency, and market reach for rural women entrepreneurs. Future research should build on these findings by employing quantitative methods to validate and generalize results, conducting longitudinal studies to track the long-term impact of sociocultural factors and digital adoption, and exploring specific digital tools and platforms that can drive business growth. Expanding the scope to include cross-regional or international comparisons and examining intersectional influences, such as education and age, will provide a deeper understanding of the

diverse challenges and opportunities faced by rural women entrepreneurs, contributing to sustainable economic development in rural communities.

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