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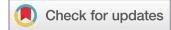
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Of resistance to patriarchy and occupation through a virtual bazaar: an institutional theory critique of the emancipatory potential of Palestinian women's digital entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how institutional contexts and digital technologies influence women's digital entrepreneurship and emancipation potential in the conflict-laden, Arab country-specific context of Palestine. Drawing on insights from Institutional Theory and emancipation literature, we capitalize on in-depth, semi-structured online interviews with Palestinian women entrepreneurs. Accordingly, we present empirical evidence demonstrating that while digital technologies enabled Palestinian women to launch their enterprises, the unsupportive institutional contexts confined them to home-based, feminine enterprises and subjected them to a toll of additional challenges, health issues and hostility. Our findings challenge the claim that digital entrepreneurship emancipates women by showcasing the context-specific nature of emancipation. This paper advances entrepreneurship research by demonstrating how Arab women's digital entrepreneurship unfolds at the intersection between emancipatory enablers and unique, conflict-laden regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutional pillars.

Introduction

Over the recent decades, the world has witnessed many conflicts and wars, including the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, and more recently the war between Ukraine and Russia, and the escalating conflict in Sudan. Although the detrimental impact of these events on the lives of those who experience war and conflict has received significant attention in global media outlets (UN Women 2022), research depicting the experience of women entrepreneurs in conflict-laden countries is scarce and fragmented (Bullough and Renko 2017; Welsh et al. 2021). While this neglect may be due to the damaging political and economic consequences of war on businesses and entrepreneurship in general (Alvi, Prasad, and Segarra 2019; Langevang and Namatovu 2019), it, nevertheless, illustrates how research has overlooked the importance of entrepreneurship in conflict-ridden countries as a means for survival and resilience in the absence of 'better choices for work' (Reynolds et al. 2005, 217). Research has also neglected the importance of women's entrepreneurship to reduce poverty and achieve gender equality in conflict-laden contexts (Rezaei et al. 2021).

A case in point is women entrepreneurs in Palestine; an Arab country that hosts the longest sustained military occupation in modern history (Maurer 2012). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the world's most enduring conflicts with more than 10,200 Palestinians killed, hundreds of

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thousands of people arrested, and more than 50,000 homes destroyed (between 1967 and 2017, Amnesty International 2018). This conflict, along with the worsening political and economic situation under the prolonged military occupation, and widespread patriarchal, gendered power relations have served to intensify the barriers hindering Palestinian women's social, economic, and political participation (UN Women 2018). Hence, Palestinian women's participation in the labour force is one of the lowest in the world, estimated at 18% compared to 68.9% for males in 2021 (International Labour Organisation 2023). Despite the long-lasting conflict, successive wars, and studies that confirm that women are adversely impacted politically and economically in conflict-laden countries, research has overlooked the experiences of women's entrepreneurs in conflict-laden Arab contexts (Al-Dajani et al. 2019; Althalathini, Al-Dajani, and Apostolopoulos 2022). Furthermore, although previous studies have explored the influence of digital technologies on the empowerment and emancipation of women in other conflict-ridden Arab countries such as Egypt and Tunisia (Howard et al. 2011), our understanding of the influence of digital technologies on the experience of Arab women entrepreneurs, especially Palestinian women, within the specific national, institutional conflict-ridden country-contexts where their entrepreneurship occurs is still limited. By dismissing the experience of Palestinian women entrepreneurs with digital technologies, we are left with an incomplete understanding of the experiences of women entrepreneurs in non-mainstream, conflict-laden countries (Sabella and El-Far 2019), and the further decontextualisation of entrepreneurship research as context remains poorly researched (Tlaiss 2019).

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to explore how institutional contexts and digital technologies influence women's digital entrepreneurship and emancipation potential in Palestine, an Arab country-specific context characterized by violent conflict and institutional voids. To better understand the influence of digital technologies on women's entrepreneurship within the institutional contexts of Palestine, we capitalize on Institutional Theory (Scott 2014) and emancipation literature (Rindova, Barry, and Ketchen 2009). To achieve our objective, we follow a qualitative interpretative methodology, drawing upon semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs in Palestine. Within this paper, we make the following contributions. First, we contribute to the emerging literature on the influence of digital technologies on women's entrepreneurship (Dy, Martin, and Marlow 2018; McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison 2020; Oggero, Rossi, and Ughetto 2020; Ughetto et al. 2020), as we demonstrate how the Palestinian women utilized digital entrepreneurship to overcome the challenges imposed by the Israeli occupation and ultimately to experience their lives and entrepreneurship as normal human beings in the face of the dehumanizing occupation (Alvi, Prasad, and Segarra 2019). Second, by exploring the influence of the regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutions on women's digital entrepreneurship in Palestine, we advance research on Institutional Theory (Yousafzai, Saeed, and Muffatto 2015) and demonstrate the tension between digital technologies' potential to emancipate and the institutional forces that unfold as strong barriers hindering the Palestinian women from realizing this promised potential. Third, we contribute to the emancipation literature (Alkhaled and Berglund 2018; Rindova, Barry, and Ketchen 2009) by adding a layer of complexity and discussing emancipation using the lens of Institutional Theory. By extending the current debate on the emancipatory contribution of digital technologies (Sharma 2022) to Palestinian women, we are extending the emancipation literature away from Western contexts (Dy, Martin, and Marlow 2018; Jennings, Jennings, and Sharifian 2016) and privileged Arab contexts (McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison 2019, 2020) into conflict-laden contexts. We also question the quest for emancipation through digital entrepreneurship by women who resist occupation and patriarchy and who are driven to digital entrepreneurship by necessity in conflict-laden contexts.

This paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we review the literature on women entrepreneurs in conflict-laden contexts, outline our theoretical framework, and provide an overview of the Palestinian context. Then, we overview the debate on the emancipatory potential of digital technologies for women entrepreneurs. Next, we outline our methodological approach and

methods. We then present our findings and discussion and move to outline our theoretical contributions and avenues for future research.

Women's entrepreneurship in conflict-laden contexts

Although conflicts globally are on the rise and extend over long periods with damaging consequences on the economic conditions and entrepreneurial activity in countries where they occur, such as Iraq (Althalathini, Al-Dajani, and Apostolopoulos 2022), Sudan (Welsh et al. 2021) or Cameroon (Castellanza 2022), entrepreneurship research focused on conflict-laden contexts is minimal. By extension, and despite the ongoing conflicts across the Arab world in countries including Sudan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, research focusing on women's entrepreneurship in these conflict laden countries is primarily in the form of reports prepared by the United Nations (e.g. UN Women reports) and by other non-government organizations (NGOs). This scarcity perseveres despite studies confirming the extreme conditions that Arab women in conflict-laden Arab countries endure (Althalathini, Al-Dajani, and Apostolopoulos 2020; Sabella and El-Far 2019) and that women are most negatively impacted in unstable countries (Bullough and Renko 2017). These shortcomings highlight how the experiences of Arab women entrepreneurs have been ignored in mainstream literature. In giving voice to the forgotten women entrepreneurs of Palestine and by contextualizing their experience in the national, institutional contexts where their entrepreneurial activities unfold, our study is primarily interested in gaining a nuanced understanding of the influence of digital technologies on their entrepreneurial experience and emancipation. To better contextualize their experience, we explore the conflict-laden context of Palestine through the lens of Institutional Theory (Scott 2014).

Institutional theory and entrepreneurship

As one of the most robust theoretical frameworks for investigating social behaviour within social sciences, including entrepreneurship (Bruton, Ahlstrom, and Li 2010; McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison 2019), Institutional Theory is primarily concerned with how individuals and organizations secure their legitimacy by conforming to institutions; the set of rules, norms, and assumptions that define what is appropriate (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) and what individuals and organizations are expected to follow (Bruton, Ahlstrom, and Li 2010; Scott 2014). According to Scott (2014), the institutional framework of any society encompasses the cultural-cognitive, regulatory, and normative pillars, which influence entrepreneurial activity (Yousafzai, Saeed, and Muffatto 2015). The cultural-cognitive pillar reflects the cognitive structures that are shared, considered typical among individuals in a certain nation, and are used as inferential references that determine the way by which actors interpret their environment (Scott 2014). These cognitive structures are rooted in societal values, culture, and religious practices. The normative pillar of the institutional profile of any nation defines and promotes appropriate behaviour for the members of society. It consists of socially shared assumptions, values, and beliefs that set the standards for appropriate behaviour (Scott 2014). As for the regulatory pillar, it refers to the existing formal laws and rules, and the enforcement of policies to ensure conformity to social expectations and behavioural standards, and sanctions for violation of these standards (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). These institutions are grounded in the influence of governmental entities, laws, law enforcement agencies, regulations, and legislation (Yousafzai, Saeed, and Muffatto 2015).

For decades, entrepreneurship research has drawn on institutional pillars to support the argument that institutional differences between countries lead to variations in the development of entrepreneurial conditions (Bruton, Ahlstrom, and Li 2010). Research has also capitalized on institutional theory to explore the institutions that promote and restrain women's entrepreneurship (Yousafzai, Saeed, and Muffatto 2015). For example, McAdam et al. (2019) showed how in the context of Saudi Arabia, Saudi women entrepreneurs capitalized on male family members to network

and expand their digital enterprises to overcome the absence of regulatory institutions supporting women's entrepreneurship. In the financially-bankrupt context of Lebanon and the absence of regulatory institutional support for small businesses, Tlaiss and McAdam (2021) revealed how the construal of entrepreneurial success of Lebanese women transformed from growing their businesses to focusing on survival and resilience to provide their families with the necessary income to survive. Indeed, previous studies confirm the importance of Institutional Theory by demonstrating how Arab women's entrepreneurship is contextually embedded in the various institutional pillars of the countries where they operate and how these pillars influence their entrepreneurial activities. Yet, our knowledge of how the various institutions in Palestine influence women's entrepreneurship is minimal. To that end, we now move to describe the Palestinian context using the lens of the three pillars of Institutional Theory.

Institutional context in Palestine

Palestine, under military occupation, has been described as an area of 'limited statehood where the state lacks effective authority and control' resulting in limited sovereignty and provision of social welfare (Arda and Banerjee 2021, 4). Following the creation of Israel as a country in 1948, millions of Palestinians have been disposed of and displaced (Arda and Banerjee 2021). Those who continue to live in Palestine have been living under Israeli occupation (Bashi and Diamond 2015) and Israel's holistic de-development process seeks to prevent the creation of an autonomous Palestinian government and reinforces the physical separation between the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Filiu 2016). To that effect, regulatory institutions in Palestine have limited abilities and authority. To further explain, since 2006, Israel has imposed on Gaza not only a series of sanctions, including restrictions on the movement of people and goods, but also a blockade where the Israeli authorities retain to themselves the right to decide on the resources and raw materials that enters the strip (World Bank 2014). The blockade has a negative impact on the economy and increases unemployment levels. Israeli forces also launched four major military attacks on the Gaza Strip throughout 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2021, which caused significant damage to the infrastructure whereby the last attack on Gaza, which lasted 11 days, resulted in US$ 380 million in physical damage and US$ 190 million in economic losses (World Bank 2021). These successive attacks and sanctions have further weakened regulatory institutions in Palestine and have resulted in challenging socio-economic conditions including the increase in poverty rates and high unemployment, especially among women and the youth (Human Rights Watch 2019). To further explain, poverty rates have reached 36% in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and 64% in the Gaza Strip (UN OCHA 2021). Almost half of the Palestinian women and more than a fifth of the Palestinian men are unemployed (unemployment of women is 42.9% and of men is 22.4%; PCBS-Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2022). These conditions have also created an aid-dependent economy where the net official development assistance received was reported at USD 2 billion in 2021 (World Bank 2023).

To overcome these distinct political, economic, and social challenges, women's interest in necessity entrepreneurship increased as they sought income to support their families (Sabella and El-Far 2019). Despite the important contribution of women's entrepreneurship to the local economy (World Bank 2018), Palestinian women suffer from the consequences of regulatory institutional voids, including a lengthy process to legally start a business (World Bank 2020), limited tax incentives for SMEs, and limited access to finance (Sultan and Sultan 2020). Palestine ranks 117 out of 190 economies in terms of ease of doing business (World Bank 2020), especially for women facing political and economic challenges as well as security barriers and restrictions on their movements that push them to operate home-based businesses (Althalathini, Al-Dajani, and Apostolopoulos 2020).

The weakness of regulatory institutions in Palestine is further compounded by frail, if any, normative institutions which significantly influence women's education. Although business incubators and accelerators receive substantial amounts of grant-financing from international organizations to promote women's entrepreneurship via training, mentoring, and networking (World Bank 2018), the lack of specialized training programmes and qualified mentors undermines these efforts.

Moreover, the volatile political situation and its consequences – through things such as road closures or the escalation of violence – hinder the ability of women entrepreneurs to participate in such programmes (Althalathini 2022). These conditions further weaken women's self-efficacy and agency to engage in entrepreneurial activity (Abdelkarim 2021). Moreover, the frequent random violent attacks on residential neighbourhoods, restrictions on the movement of Palestinians, strenuous Israeli army checkpoints, Israeli policy that allows the lengthy detention of Palestinians without justification, along with the regular harassment and humiliation of Palestinians by Israeli settlers have been, beyond doubt, detrimental to the growth of, and increase in, women-owned enterprises (Morrar, Amara, and Syed Zwick 2022). The presence of Israeli military checkpoints on main roads can make travel between Palestinian cities and villages cumbersome and time-consuming, discouraging Palestinians from travelling unless it is necessary or urgent (Griffiths and Repo 2021). Palestinians often need to obtain permits and endure rigorous security procedures to cross these checkpoints, which are often dehumanizing and infringe upon their dignity (see, for example, The Present 2020). These normative institutional conditions make women's entrepreneurship in Palestine a form of everyday resistance (Sabella and El-Far 2019).

This challenging situation for Palestinian women is further aggravated by the salient cultural-cognitive institutions. Palestine is a traditional patriarchal society with a strict set of beliefs about culturally appropriate behaviours for women and men (Althalathini 2022). Based on what is contextually considered acceptable gender norms, Palestinian women are expected to be feminine and to prioritize their responsibility towards their homes and families, while men are expected to be masculine, aggressive, and the main breadwinners (Al-Dajani et al. 2019). Accordingly, many Palestinian women entrepreneurs operate home-based businesses in feminine sectors such as embroidery, cosmetics, or food preparation (Althalathini, Al-Dajani, and Apostolopoulos 2020).

In an attempt to enhance their human capital and improve their livelihoods, Palestinian women capitalize on the availability and affordability of digital technologies to engage in digital entrepreneurship (Bjørn and Boulus-Rødje 2018). Nevertheless, social support programmes fail to deliver sufficient digital training to women entrepreneurs (Karaki 2021). Although Third Generation (3 G) has only been available in Palestine since 2018 (West Bank only) due to restrictions imposed by the Israeli government, the proliferation of technology and the internet have increased to unprecedented levels with more than 91% of households in Palestine having internet access during the first quarter of 2022 (PCBS-Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2022). While 62.4% of men and 60.9% of women own a smartphone (PCBS-Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2022), 69% of women and 72% of men above the age of 10 use the internet (PCBS-Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2020). Moreover, the percentage of women who use social media (e.g. Facebook or Instagram) is increasing and has reached 84% (in comparison to 88% among men) (PCBS-Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2020). Despite the availability of technology and some recent reports confirming an increase in the number of Palestinian women digital entrepreneurs, our knowledge of their experience is scant, hence the objective of this study.

Digital entrepreneurship: emancipatory perspective

In marked contrast to classical entrepreneurship theories which studied entrepreneurship in terms of financial performance, wealth creation and contribution to economic growth (e.g. Acs and Szerb 2007; Carter 2011), Rindova, Barry, and Ketchen (2009) viewed entrepreneurship as emancipatory and a driver of social change. Defining emancipation as 'breaking free from authority and changing position in the social order', Rindova et al., (2009, 479) and others (Rindova, Srinivas, and Martins 2022) perceive entrepreneurship as emancipatory to women as they seek to disrupt the status quo and overcome constraints that hinder their entrepreneurial activities. This approach to entrepreneurship considers autonomy as one of the main motivators and drivers of entrepreneurship and self-employment, and a goal of emancipation. Entrepreneurship is therefore perceived as a mean to

emancipate women from patriarchy and poverty (e.g. Essers and Tedmanson 2014; Scott et al. 2012; Trivedi and Petkova 2022).

Nevertheless, a growing body of literature (Ibáñez and Guerrero 2022; Jennings, Jennings, and Sharifian 2016; Verduijn and Essers 2013) has been questioning the emancipatory promises of entrepreneurship while emphasizing the embedded nature of entrepreneurship within institutional contexts where it occurs (Castellanza 2022; Tlaiss 2019). Entrepreneurship could 'reproduce prevailing gendered relationships and constraints rather than offer liberation from them', even in developed economies (Jennings, Jennings, and Sharifian 2016, 101; McAdam and Marlow 2013). While Ahl and Marlow (2021) argued that low-margin entrepreneurship could exploit women rather than emancipate them, Castellanza (2022) further argued that marginalization and rigid social structures prevent women from removing gendered constraints and attaining emancipation. For example, Al-Dajani et al. (2015) argued that the emancipatory potential for poor Palestinian women entrepreneurs was further constrained in fragile, patriarchal contexts where there was no significant change to their status or gender roles. Similarly, Karki and Xheneti (2018) found that while entrepreneurship improves women's confidence and life aspirations, it does not address issues of poverty and gender relations. Accordingly, the emancipation potential of women's entrepreneurship in patriarchal contexts has not been empirically confirmed yet.

This ongoing debate has been further complicated by the advent of digital technologies (Nambisan, Siegel, and Kenney 2018). Digital technologies have forged a new shape of entrepreneurship, so-called digital entrepreneurship, which is defined as the pursuit of opportunities based on the use of digital media and other information and communication technologies (Davidson and Vaast 2010, 2). Given the rise of digital technologies, scholarly interest in the influence of digital technologies on women's entrepreneurship is not only increasing but also attracting attention given the contradictory findings between two opposing camps of thought on its contribution to the emancipation of women entrepreneurs.

According to one group of studies, advances in technology have resulted in leapfrog opportunities for women entrepreneurs (Ughetto et al. 2020) through the democratization of entrepreneurship that enables women to create new ventures (Elia, Margherita, and Passiante 2020), to access capital and funding (Orser, Coleman, and Li 2020) and local and international market knowledge, and to interact with customers and partners (Pergelova et al. 2019). Therefore, digital technologies are considered gender equalizers, where they contribute to women's emancipation by enabling them to work in diverse industries such as technology (Sharma 2022), and to resist the gender oppression that they encounter in their day-to-day lives offline (Sundermeier, Wessel, and Davidson 2018). In other words, scholars belonging to this group of studies argue that digital tools such as social media, contribute to empowering women entrepreneurs (Ughetto et al. 2020) given their affordability and the flexibility they grant women to reconcile their business and family responsibilities (Dy, Martin, and Marlow 2018) and enlarge their networks (Cesaroni, Demartini, and Paoloni 2017). The rise of digital technologies has opened up opportunities for women's social and labour inclusion (Novo-Corti, Varela-Candamio, and García-Álvarez 2014), even in the most conservative of countries such as Saudi Arabia. According to McAdam et al (2019, 2020), digital technologies are unfolding as effective platforms for providing safe spaces and transforming family and societal relationships, leading to the emancipation of Saudi women entrepreneurs. Therefore, digital technologies can benefit women entrepreneurs where the gender-related challenges they face would otherwise limit their access to resources (Marlow and McAdam 2013). To that end, we argue that this camp of studies perceives digital technologies as 'game changers' for women who are excluded from economic life due to gendered norms and economic restrictions and sanctions (Steel 2021, 23).

In contrast, another group of studies questions the claims that digital technologies emancipate women and argue that online environments reproduce social hierarchies and gendered stereotypes. According to this camp of studies, the online environment mirrors offline inequality (Robinson et al. 2015) as women digital entrepreneurs feel forced to conform to traditional codes of femininity when they work online (Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017). Furthermore, as far as traditional gender roles are

concerned, women entrepreneurs still face the 'multitasking whirlpool' and 'the multiple levels of tension and contradictory feelings' (Kamberidou 2020, 4) due to expectations to fulfil their conflicting roles as mothers and wives as well as successful entrepreneurs. These conflicting expectations resulted in higher business exit levels for women entrepreneurs with young children (Jayawarna, Marlow, and Swail 2021). Accordingly, this camp of studies questions the emancipation argument and argues that digital technologies further accentuate barriers for women entrepreneurs as they intensify childcare and business responsibilities while requiring technical knowledge and financial and human capital (Dy, Martin, and Marlow 2018).

This lack of consensus not only explains why this area of debate merits further research, but also highlights the need to further contextualize the experience of women entrepreneurs with digital technologies beyond those in Western economies (i.e. Dy, Martin, and Marlow 2018) and the privileged Arab Gulf countries (i.e. McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison 2019, 2020). Given Palestinian women's long history of resilience and the unique institutional conditions in Palestine, we explore how the institutional context of Palestine allied with digital technologies influence these women's digital entrepreneurship and emancipation potential.

Methodology

We adopted an interpretivist epistemological approach which is based on a 'life-word ontology' that considers all observation as 'theory and value-laden' (Leitch, Hill, and Harrison 2010, 690). This approach is concerned with understanding human behaviour and social life and argues that the investigation of the social world cannot uncover objective truth. To that effect, interpretivism allowed us to view our research objective holistically and capture the dynamic quality of the social world (Leitch, Hill, and Harrison 2010). To better understand the 'individual realities' of Palestinian women entrepreneurs and their 'social construction', in-depth, semi-structured, online interviews were undertaken. The interviews facilitated the generation of deep descriptions and nuanced insights into our participants' real-life (Tlaiss 2019). This methodological approach, which was compatible with the exploratory nature of this study, allowed for the collection of both retrospective and real-time accounts from those experiencing the phenomenon of theoretical interest (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013).

Data collection

Data was collected throughout the year 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collection process entailed online interviews with 22 Palestinian women entrepreneurs. The interviews were conducted using online, social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp (Lo Iacono, Symonds, and Brown 2016), lasted between 60 to 120 minutes, were tape-recorded, and were transcribed verbatim. Through network sampling capitalizing on the first author's personal networks, and snowballing (Cohen and Arieli 2011), women entrepreneurs willing to share their experiences were identified. Purposive sampling was used (Patton 1990) where the first author focused on identifying Palestinian women entrepreneurs who started and have been running their own enterprises for at least three years, with the intent of overcoming the biases of newness (Tlaiss and McAdam 2021). The first author approached women who started and were operating a business that capitalized on digital technologies (Davidson and Vaast 2010). For example, the use of technology for producing digital products, digital selling, digital marketing, and online access to information and learning. All the participants have at least a bachelor's degree and more than half were married with children. The women ran a wide range of businesses in traditionally female-oriented areas such as selling clothes/shoes as well as making and selling jewellery, embroidery, food, and organic cosmetics. With the exception of one interviewee who started her business with her sister but ended up running it alone, all of the women in this study started their businesses and were running them alone (i.e. solo-preneurs). The businesses, with the exception of three, were all home-based businesses as will be discussed later. Table 1 provides background demographics on the women and their businesses.

Table 1. Demographic data of participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Social Status	Education Level	Area	Business
Fai	37	Married	Bachelor	Gaza Strip	Children's fashion design
Sara	28	Single	Bachelor	Gaza Strip	Glass and wood arts
Maram	33	Single	Bachelor	Gaza Strip	Teaching Arabic as a second language
Rose	39	Married	Bachelor	Gaza Strip	Interactive book design
Rita	30	Divorced	Bachelor	Gaza Strip	Flowers and embroidery/gifts
Salwa	38	Married	Bachelor	West Bank	Organic skincare and cosmetics
Nara	26	Married	Bachelor	Gaza Strip	Bakery
Yara	33	Single	Bachelor	Gaza Strip	Embroidery
Nesma	29	Married	Master	West Bank	Digital marketing
Asma	39	Married	Master	Gaza Strip	Crochet toys
Dana	30	Single	Bachelor	Gaza Strip	Furniture design
Mira	27	Married	Bachelor	Gaza Strip	Jewellery and accessories design and manufacturing
Kinda	34	Single	Bachelor	West Bank	WordPress developer
Joud	32	Divorced	Bachelor	Gaza Strip	Educational toys/teaching aids
Zainab	40	Married	Bachelor	West Bank	Food business
Farah	38	Married	Bachelor	West Bank	Online clothing store
Amani	28	Single	Bachelor	West Bank	Graphic designer
Maha	33	Married	Master	West Bank	Digital marketing
Elham	37	Married	Bachelor	West Bank	Online shoe store
Hanin	29	Married	Bachelor	West Bank	Online clothing store
Nancy	30	Married	Bachelor	Gaza Strip	Artisan desserts and cakes
Tala	32	Married	Bachelor	West Bank	Applications developer

To establish rapport and trust with the participants, the first author started each interview by thanking the participant for her participation, confirming the confidentiality of the subject matter discussed, and the anonymity of the data collected through the use of pseudonyms (Verduijn and Essers 2013). After asking several questions about the personal demographics of the participants and details about their enterprises, the participants were asked questions about their lives and careers leading up to the development of their digital enterprise. Then, they were asked questions on how they developed their digital enterprise since start-up, what challenges they faced, how they dealt with them, and how technology influenced their start-up and operation.

Data analysis

All the interviews were transcribed using MAXQDA software, which supports the Arabic language that was used in all the interviews. The transcription and thematic analysis were undertaken in the same language as the interviews to avoid meaning loss during the translation process. However, translation to the English language while writing the findings was carried out by the authors who are bilingual in Arabic and English. To eliminate translation-related problems and increase the validity of the translation process, back translation was performed (Leitch, Hill, and Harrison 2010). In other words, after the Arabic findings were translated into English by the authors of this paper, the English findings were then back translated into Arabic by an independent bilingual academic. To reduce any translation biases, bilingual academicians familiar with the topic and the subtleties of the languages were also consulted (Tlaiss and McAdam 2021).

Although we did not adopt a grounded theory approach, we capitalized on the methodology of Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2013) during our analysis wherein the theoretical relationships between the codes were considered, and these first-order codes were categorized into second-order themes and aggregated into three aggregate theoretical dimensions as shown in Table 2. We looked at the emerging themes and the relationships between them by re-reading the coded data extracts under each theme. This process required continually moving back and forth between the coded data extracts and themes that emerged to ensure that the themes and aggregate theoretical dimensions made sense together and for the research aim.

Table 2. Data structure.

First Order Codes	Second-Order Themes	Aggregate Theoretical Dimensions
Israeli military occupation, active conflict, political blockade, checkpoints, security issues, living in fear and uncertainty	Institutional presence	Regulatory Institutions
A failed state, lack of income, lack of jobs, need for additional income, lack of tax incentives, inefficient regulations, underdeveloped physical and financial infrastructure, informal business, informal export, informal delivery and informal payment	Institutional voids	
Access to internet, social media and smartphones, digital marketing, electronic word-of-mouth, digital products, digital networking	Use of digital technologies and social media	Normative Institutions
Exposure to (local) role models, learning online, approaching experts, local and international visibility, endorsement messages via social media, access to customers abroad, the role of the diaspora	Enhanced human and social capital	
Virtual marketing, virtual networking, being exposed to the outside world, promote and preserve Palestinian heritage	Virtual Bazaar	Cultural-cognitive Institutions
Persistent traditional gender roles, entrepreneurship as an additional burden, striving to balance work and family responsibilities, entrepreneurship as an additional burden, feelings of guilt for not being fully dedicated to family and children, experiencing physical and emotional health problems, male relatives' increased jealousy due to their success, male relatives' increased hostility resulting from the women's earning ability	Patriarchal society	

Findings

The data analysis revealed the different ways in which the institutional context of Palestine and digital technologies influenced Palestinian women's digital entrepreneurship. The following sections discuss this in relation to the regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutional forces.

Palestinian women entrepreneurs: daily experiences

Before demonstrating the influence of the specific institutional pillars, we would like to start our findings with echoing some of the Palestinian women's daily experiences to better contextualize their entrepreneurship. The Palestinian women in this study capitalized on our interest in their lives and entrepreneurial experiences, and used the interviews as a platform to express the magnitude and multitude of their daily suffering, which ranges from Israeli occupation practices and restrictions on movement to living in constant fear, insecurity and humiliation as per Maha and Salwa respectively:

> We have to be very careful when driving. Any movement you will do, even if you do not mean it, they [Israeli forces] might think you will run over them so they will immediately shoot you … I was once with my husband and we suddenly saw the infantry corps, it wasn't usual to see them on this road … my blood ran cold.

> We are controlled and watched all the time. Everywhere you travel, there are cameras, Israeli forces and checkpoints … They [Israeli forces] point their guns at you while laughing because they see you are scared [as a woman]… It has nothing to do with security, but it is about oppressing and humiliating us.

The women in this study also highlighted the financial and economic impact that the long-lasting military occupation has on their lives and the overall living conditions of people in Palestine. The participants spoke about limited income, struggles to provide their families with basic necessities, shortage of resources and living in a depleted economy, and the lack of job opportunities which ultimately drove them towards necessity, digital entrepreneurship as reflected by Kinda and Nara respectively:

> I worked in five places in two years … some were temporary jobs … others ended because these jobs were project-based and the funding for the project was stopped … it is frustrating to rely only on intermittent jobs.

> My son asked me to buy him a toy … I felt very overwhelmed … My husband works intermittently as an electrician…I wanted to enhance our income.

Regulative institutions

The regulatory institutional forces, those present and imposed by the Israeli occupation and the institutional voids resulting from the weaknesses of the Palestinian authorities, had a detrimental influence on women's lives and entrepreneurship. To start with, the Palestinian women presented a comprehensive account of the institutional forces that the Israeli occupation imposed on their lives, including the police state where they experience a lack of protection and safety, and uncertainty which collectively make it extremely challenging for them to start and run a successful business as per Amani:

> The Israeli forces can break into any house at any time, inspecting housing and detaining Palestinians … they can destroy or close your business … we do not have any protection from the Palestinian authorities.

The women in the West Bank also spoke about the checkpoints that the Israeli army imposes on Palestinians and the humiliation involved in waiting in queues for ID checks. They described the limitations that the armed forces impose on their movement and mobility as they suffer from crowding, and closure of certain routes and streets as per Elham and Tala respectively:

> Once they closed the roads towards Jericho, so I had to travel for three hours to find a way home. Eventually, I had to sleep in Ramallah at my friend's house. I had to wake up at 6 am on the second day to be among the first at the checkpoint to go home to my kids.

> I experience three checkpoints daily … Once I had to go through a physical inspection by a male soldier … because there were no female soldiers, which is the case at many checkpoints. It was dehumanising for me as a woman, but to whom I shall complain? They are the occupiers and we do not have a government to protect us.

The women in Gaza Strip discussed the blockade that prevents them from enhancing their human capital and delays delivering their products to their clients as per Dana and Sara respectively:

> I lost two opportunities to travel to Jordan for a workshop because I was not able to travel from Gaza. The third time I got the Israeli permit only one day before the travel date. I cried not out of happiness but because of this uncertainty and I experienced frustration and a loss of passion since I needed a permit to leave my country.

> I waited for around 7 months for some materials I ordered through Ali Express from China. They arrived on time on the Israeli side, but it took longer to arrive in Gaza … This delays my work and keeps my earnings limited. I also need items that are forbidden to enter Gaza, such as certain colours.

With these occupation-imposed, regulatory institutional forces hindering their lives and movements and the urgent need to provide for their families, the Palestinian women resorted to digital technologies to create home-based businesses where they feel safe, can stay close to their children, and away from the police state and checkpoints. For example, Salwa stated:

> I used to not go to work when there were severe restrictions … because roads might close and I might not be able to go back to my kids. Also, it can be scary and mainly if there are settlers who might attack you. I don't want my kids to grow up without a mother … I decided to make skincare and cosmetic products at home and sell them online.

Nevertheless, these regulatory institutional forces had a negative influence on their digital enterprises as explained by Zainab:

> My business stops on such days … when there are [violent] escalations in Nablus or the West Bank … events and weddings are cancelled, and movements become more restricted … I cannot deliver the food orders for those people who ordered them …

The Palestinian women entrepreneurs were also suffering from the regulatory institutional voids, namely the absence of any form of formal entrepreneurial support, which is critical for the survival of

their enterprises in a context that already suffers from limited resources. To further explain, the overall living conditions, unstable context along regulatory institutional voids, namely a lack of tax incentives, drove the majority of the participants away from formally registering their businesses and into operating digital home-based businesses in the informal economy. This was explained by Asma and Yara respectively:

> Given the successive wars . . . you couldn't trust the situation, you couldn't trust that you will have good sales every month. Therefore, I prefer not to register my business because I'm afraid of paying taxes.

> I was not able to provide banks and international organisations working in Gaza with tax invoices as my business was not registered . . . they wanted to buy souvenirs for their employees and foreign visitors, so I lost this business with them.

The Palestinian women did not receive any institutional financing for their businesses, and they had to rely on their personal savings and/or financial support from their informal networks. Digital technologies, however, helped to mitigate the uncertain environment and the limited access to resources as per Tala: '*I develop applications as the cost and risk for anything digital are low and even if you don't make profits, your loss is low*'. Further, the participants also could not access any formal educational support to help them grow their businesses. In other words, most of our participants did not receive any entrepreneurship-related training and those who did, received very generic training that did not attend to their growing business needs as explained by Sara: '*I have many ideas and I feel I can do more but I do not know how to start or where I can find help . . . I did not undertake any training and I do not know about fundraising*'. In addition, the regulatory institutional entities that could help the women entrepreneurs grow their business through exporting were also missing, so the women had to capitalize on their own networks to expand and export as per Rose:

> I receive orders from abroad, such as the Gulf countries and the USA . . . I usually deliver them by asking people who are travelling to these destinations to take these items with them . . . sometimes they ask me for money. . .it is very expensive to use logistics companies such as DHL.

Another institutional void that the women endured was the absence of developed digital and financial infrastructure and the challenges to access a reliable online payment gateway. They explained how they relied on '*cash or Western Union . . . I don't trust PayPal*' (Maram). Hence, the lack of trusted online payment platforms and lack of knowledge about how to use these platforms along with poor physical infrastructure, slow internet, and power cuts (mainly in Gaza) unfolded as significant barriers hindering the success and profitability of these digital enterprises, as Dana explained:

> Uploading designs to the website takes time and the electricity supply is bad and is always getting cut . . . I have to give later dates to my customers, and this affects my credibility . . . I experienced many situations where customers withdrew [their orders] while I was working hard on the designs . . . This increases my financial problems.

While the availability of technology provided Palestinian women with the means to start their businesses, the regulatory institutional constraints imposed by the Israeli occupation and the regulatory institutional voids hindered the growth of these businesses. These institutional challenges drove the women to operate in traditional, feminine sectors that typically require low capital, as explained by Maha, '*in this country, there will always be demand for food businesses even if the situation is bad, but there is also demand for our authentic embroidery from people abroad*'.

Normative institutions

Despite the toll of regulatory institutional challenges facing Palestinian women, all the participants in this study owned a smartphone and had access to the internet, which ultimately facilitated the creation of their online, digital enterprise as per Yara:

> Embroidery was my favourite hobby . . . we were creating embroidery and used to give it to our relatives and friends as gifts . . . My sister and I were jobless, so we thought of creating a Facebook page and starting to make and sell our embroidery products.

Our participants' enterprises were digitized, either fully or partially, and operated across a wide range of areas such as digital marketing, graphic design and application development. They capitalized on various social media platforms to advertise and ultimately sell traditional products such as embroidery as per Farah:

> I have Facebook and Instagram accounts where I post my products regularly. I use Instagram more as people like to see images [of embroidery work]. . .Customers can text me on social media or call for orders.

Digital technologies enabled the Palestinian women to grow their business locally as they relied on electronic word-of-mouth and the use of paid ads and local influencers to reach a wide customer base as Mira stated:

> I ask my friends, relatives and current customers to share and comment on my posts . . . Mothers are at home and most of the day are on Facebook or Instagram so [female] influencers are on the rise in Palestine. I paid once [she mentioned the name of the influencer] and I had more people liking my page and asking for orders.

Digital technologies helped the Palestinian women entrepreneurs to grow their businesses by accessing wider markets versus depending on local customers with limited purchasing power as per Nesma:

> Our customers in the Gulf are so happy. They are willing to pay because the prices we offer are related to our [low] living standard. They have a higher living standard. For them, we are a treasure; we offer excellent quality and give them an excellent price.

The ability to access social media enabled the Palestinian participants to reach their friends and relatives abroad (diaspora) to extend their marketing reach as explained by Dana:

> I reached companies in the Netherlands through an internet search, then I asked my friend who lives there to contact the company directly. I sold them the first design and then the other three designs. I did the same in Canada and I'm working to reach other companies in Turkey as I have a few relatives living there.

Some participants, leaning on the Palestinian diaspora, also created online gift shops to sell their products. This was explained by Rita:

> People [Palestinian diaspora] contact me from all over the world to prepare and send gifts to their people in Gaza and West Bank. . .the demand is mainly high during Ramadan and Eid.

The women entrepreneurs in this study used technology not only to enhance the visibility of their enterprises locally and internationally but also as a means to demonstrate their perseverance despite the toll of institutional challenges as per Amana:

> I receive many messages on Facebook that I am a good example of a Palestinian woman . . . they feel surprised that I am working in technology, and that I produce this high-quality work . . . This enhances my self-efficacy and persistence to continue.

Moreover, technology played a significant role in helping the women improve their human capital and develop professionally as entrepreneurs through providing free learning and development opportunities. In the absence of regulatory institutional authorities that seek to advance Palestinian women entrepreneurs' education and development, technology was critical for the development of the women and their enterprises in the absence of access to expert advice. To

that effect, Fai explained: *'I used YouTube to learn how to teach online and deliver effective content and how to use Instagram for marketing and promotion'*. Nesma also said: *'With the lack of real experts to communicate with and benefit from their experiences [in Palestine] . . . we have to rely on the internet for learning and approaching experts'*.

The participants used the online platforms to help other women by providing them with learning and development opportunities and access to successful Palestinian women entrepreneurs who were a source of inspiration and motivation. This was explained by Hanin, Nancy and Rose respectively:

> I know a few women who started a page on Instagram and started bringing clothes from Turkey and selling them online. I saw there was good demand for their products so I thought I might try the same.

> I observe the social accounts of many influencers mainly the ones in Gaza . . . how they market their products . . . I read about their success stories and learn.

> I created a Facebook group [TITLE] to give entrepreneurial training to women and think outside the box. I am also planning to start 'The Young Entrepreneur Competition for kids', to teach kids the meaning of entrepreneurship.

Therefore, access to the internet, smartphones and social media enabled Palestinian women to start digital enterprises while enhancing their social and human capital.

Cultural-cognitive institutions

Interestingly, the availability of the internet and digital technologies, and access to social media paved the way for the creation and participation of our participants in a virtual bazaar. Bazaars are popular physical marketplaces in Palestinian society. The participants in this study transformed the social media platforms into virtual bazaars where they advanced their networking experience. They used them to interact and network with other women, learn from others, and ultimately sell their products. Rose stated: *'we had a virtual bazaar in the Facebook group . . . I asked other women to display their products, prices, explanations . . . clients were bargaining and contesting . . . it was perfectly interactive'*. The virtual bazaar enabled the women to expand their customer base where they used social media and diaspora to promote these bazaars as stated by Asma:

> I invited my people and customers abroad to join the [virtual] bazaar . . . I asked my relatives in Saudi Arabia to spread the word about it . . . we had women attending from many countries and we were able to sell most of what we displayed.

The virtual bazaar enabled the participants to navigate movement restrictions and the blockade, and exposed them to the outside world as Fai explained:

> I never travelled outside Gaza, and I never met anyone who is not Palestinian . . . it is only the internet that connects me to the world . . . I met and talked to many women from different countries in the [virtual] bazaar which was a new experience for me.

Remarkably, these women used the bazaars as a way to promote, revive, and preserve their Palestinian heritage, especially with products such as embroidery, woodwork and food as per Yara: *'I regularly participate in Folklore Bazaar to preserve our identity and history'*.

The participants in this study did reflect on the patriarchal, masculine nature of their society and the challenges they faced as a result of the salient cultural-cognitive institutional forces in Palestine as well as gendered expectations. The women explained how they were questioned, ridiculed, and doubted since entrepreneurship continues to be perceived as a male's job in the Palestinian context. Per Ilham:

> I don't think that he (my husband) and my acquaintances took me seriously [as a businesswoman] . . . until I was able to provide income and become known in the area.

Furthermore, they explained how their choice of digital, home-based entrepreneurship was influenced not only by the restrictions on movement imposed by the Israeli occupation but also by their desire to reduce cultural criticism and rejection. Gendered expectations in the patriarchal society of Palestine limit women's suitability for their role as mothers or for other feminized jobs (e.g. teaching). Therefore, the women in this study resorted to digital, home-based entrepreneurship to demonstrate their commitment to their families. This was clearly stated by Fai:

> . . . he [the husband] only accepted working at home . . . Although I got some [job] opportunities in the past . . . for him, the house and kids should be my priority.

Digital, home-based businesses were also an intentional choice for some women and a reaction to their experience of gender discrimination in employment as per Maram:

> My (male) manager was jealous of me because I was energetic and had a passion for learning and perseverance. He was telling me 'your place is the kitchen' . . .He made me run away from the place.

Regardless of the reasons that drove the Palestinian women entrepreneurs to digital, home-based entrepreneurship, the women were expected to be full-time entrepreneurs, as well as mothers and wives. This double bind increased the women's responsibilities and made their working hours harder and longer as explained by Joud, *'I work during the night after the kids are asleep or I wake up very early depending on the power [electricity] schedule'.*

Known for their resistance to Israeli occupation, the Palestinian women in this study were committed to conforming to gender roles and gendered expectations, even if their double bind hindered the growth of their business. This was explained by Zainab:

> My kids and home are my responsibility . . . it will be difficult for me to commit more than 3 hours a day to my work . . . Plus, I do not have enough money to rent a place.

As the women sought to live within the patriarchal cultural-cognitive institutional forces and discriminatory gendered expectations all while growing their businesses, they suffered from health problems, as well as physical and emotional burnout. As per Nara and Farah respectively:

> I am overwhelmed, I feel I am 56 years old and not 26. I have health issues as I am working on my own and making cakes with basic and limited equipment . . . My husband believes that the household and childcare are my responsibilities. I also have to serve my extended family.

> I will give up the business [if the economic situation of her husband changes], I feel tired.

Despite the exhausting experience of the double bind, the married women in this study felt guilty for not living up to societal expectations and cultural-cognitive institutional teachings as per Hanin's statement:

> I use the mobile phone often to communicate with my customers and suppliers and monitor delivery. My eyes and fingers hurt . . . sometimes my daughter asks me to leave the mobile, otherwise, she will not talk to me. This business makes me feel like I am not a good Mom.

In addition to pervasive guilt, the Palestinian women were subject to hostility from male relatives. Although the women in this study were working to ensure the survival of their families, they were simultaneously challenging ingrained gender roles that assign breadwinning to men and so became victims of jealousy. According to Rita:

> My business was the reason for my divorce . . . I was persecuted by my ex-husband due to his jealousy of me for having more income and getting more popularity.

Although none of the participants reported being subjected to physical abuse, they were subject to verbal and emotional abuse. The women's earning capacity and success resulted in their suffering as a result of the cultural-cognitive institutions in Palestine as per Nancy:

> The man (husband) might feel happy about your success but not if you are more successful than him … I sometimes felt his jealousy when I talked about people's messages praising my work… Sometimes he would create a fight to disturb my work.

These findings demonstrate that although the cognitive-cultural institutional factors fostered the development of a virtual bazaar, they, nevertheless, overburdened the Palestinian women with additional responsibilities, and gendered expectations, and left them subject to male relatives' jealousy and hostility.

Discussion

The aim of this paper is to explore how institutional contexts and digital technologies influence women's digital entrepreneurship and its emancipation potential in the conflict-laden context of Palestine. Faced with the prevalence of challenging living and working conditions in Palestine (UN OCHA 2021) and worsening political and economic conditions, including the lack of job opportunities, gender discrimination in organizational settings, and limited income (Arda and Banerjee 2021; Human Rights Watch 2019), the Palestinian women could not sit still. Enabled by the availability of the internet and social media (PCBS-Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2020), our findings demonstrate how the women in our study used available, modest resources, i.e. their smartphones, internet, and social media, to tackle the resource-constrained environment and the difficult institutional context. They challenged the pervasive Palestinian regulatory institutional forces that denied them any support and the cultural-cognitive forces that consider entrepreneurship to be a man's job and opted to start a business while capitalizing on the normative institutional forces to expand their market reach and enhance their networking and learning. This finding confirms previous findings on how entrepreneurship unfolds as a means of survival for women in challenging contexts (e.g. Bullough and Renko 2017) and how technology provides opportunities for women to engage in entrepreneurial activities (e.g. McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison 2019; Ughetto et al. 2020).

Palestine, with a population of just 5.3 million in 2021 (PCBS-Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2022), does not have the advantage of a large domestic consumer market or well-developed venture capital and stock markets. Combined with high rates of poverty and unemployment (Human Rights Watch 2019) purchasing power is further reduced. Therefore, the ability of our participants to access the internet and establish a digital enterprise enabled them to overcome the regulatory institutional forces imposed by the Israeli occupation, the blockade and travel restrictions and connect them digitally to the outside world. Through digital technology, the Palestinian women were able to survive the toll of institutional voids, including the lack of tax incentives that led them to operate in the informal economy and left them with limited educational and developmental support and no trusted financial platform (Althalathini 2022). Digital technologies also helped the Palestinian women penetrate markets locally and abroad, increase their sales and profits, and ultimately improve their standard of living. Digital technologies helped Palestinian women strengthen their own potential and further act on challenges specific to their lives (Sundermeier, Wessel, and Davidson 2018) by providing them with platforms that helped them improve their professional development (online learning) and gain access to women role models who succeeded in business in Palestine. Digital technologies also provided Palestinian women with financial independence, increased awareness, and shared knowledge via digital platforms (McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison 2019). Collectively, these activities demonstrate the influence of normative institutional forces on the Palestinian women's enterprises and their own education and development.

Digital technologies also enabled Palestinian women to digitalize cultural-cognitive events through the creation of virtual bazaars, which further enabled local and international trade and ultimately helped their businesses grow. The novelty of this finding is in the ease with which the bazaar was translated into the digital space which ultimately renders it a cultural-cognitive institution as much as it is a physical marketplace, albeit being rather informal in nature. What is unique

about our findings is how the virtual bazaar enabled the Palestinian women to defy the high level of unemployment and poverty, movement restrictions, and the Gaza blockade, and to increase the exposure of their products to international markets. Moreover, it was interesting to highlight how the Palestinian women used these virtual bazaars to promote and preserve their cultural heritage, which they considered part of their identity and history (Al-Dajani et al. 2015). In addition, the role of the Palestinian diaspora was evident, presenting an opportunity to approach customers in international markets in addition to connecting them to their families and friends in Palestine. It is worth mentioning that the severe political conflicts in recent decades have generated chronic waves of Palestinian refugees, nearly 7 million (PCBS-Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2022). Hence, we argue that by challenging the traditional expectation of women as mothers and housewives (Ojediran and Anderson 2020), the women in this study unfolded as pioneers confirming the resilience of Palestinian women (Al-Dajani et al. 2019; Althalathini, Al-Dajani, and Apostolopoulos 2022; Sabella and El-Far 2019).

Despite these hints of support, the Palestinian women entrepreneurs' experience challenges the claims of previous studies (e.g. McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison 2020; Sharma 2022) regarding the emancipatory influence of digital technologies on women entrepreneurs, for several reasons. Our findings reveal the magnitude of the absence of formal regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutional support in Palestine and the deterring influence that these voids have on women's digital entrepreneurship. Despite their relatively high level of education, the women in our study found themselves confronted with several regulatory and normative institutional challenges which pushed them to the creation of home-based informal enterprises (Bullough and Renko 2017; Rezaei et al. 2021; Welsh et al. 2021). These normative challenges include a rapidly changing political situation along with regulatory institutional barriers such as insecurity and limitations on mobility as a result of checkpoints (Griffiths and Repo 2021) and voids such as the absence of tax incentives and other supporting regulations regarding (digital) entrepreneurship (Althalathini, Al-Dajani, and Apostolopoulos 2020; Sultan and Sultan 2020). Collectively, these challenges pave the way for the unfolding of a home-based digital enterprise as the safest option to generate income. Also, the underdeveloped physical and financial infrastructure – power shortages, issues with bank transfers, along with poor digital infrastructure (such as 2 G in Gaza and 3 G in the West Bank due to Israeli restrictions) – hinder women's ability to grow their businesses. People in Palestine do not use or trust online payment platforms such as PayPal because of the poor infrastructure (Bjørn and Boulus-Rødje 2018), which resulted in the women entrepreneurs' failure to establish credibility when dealing with customers abroad. The infrastructure shortcomings drove the women to create informal exporting techniques using informal networks.

Ultimately, our findings demonstrate how the unsupportive regulatory institutions and the hostile normative institutional forces have reinforced the promotion of home-based informal enterprises (e.g. Althalathini, Al-Dajani, and Apostolopoulos 2020), the challenges in transforming into formal businesses (Karki and Xheneti 2018), and ultimately pushed women towards feminine businesses. These types of businesses were further promoted as the women lack advanced business knowledge and digital skills and use the simplest forms of digital technology. Concepts such as business growth and crowdfunding might be common in other countries but were not familiar or relevant given the institutional voids that the women in this study endure. Hence, our findings largely question the potential emancipation of the women who are still dominant in the informal, feminine sector, selling consumer goods which, according to previous research (Al-Dajani et al. 2019; Jayawarna, Marlow, and Swail 2021; Steel 2021), reinforce the sexual division of labour and constrain growth beyond micro-entrepreneurship. These findings also demonstrate the importance of Institutional Theory in entrepreneurship research (Yousafzai, Saeed, and Muffatto 2015). They also highlight the importance of contextualizing women's entrepreneurship research (Tlaiss 2019; Tlaiss and McAdam 2021), especially in conflict-laden contexts with prevalent institutional challenges. Our findings also demonstrate how the women in our study were more survivalist entrepreneurs than growth-oriented entrepreneurs for two main reasons: a) the Palestinian women did not use their knowledge

(informal learning using digital technologies) to improve their economic and social conditions given the widespread institutional voids that they experience. They opted to use their knowledge to survive as individuals and ensure the survival of their businesses (Manzanera-Ruiz et al. 2023); and b) In sharp contrast to their counterparts in the privileged, politically stable Arab Gulf countries (McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison 2020) where access to financial support and training are available and easy to access, the Palestinian women lacked key institutional forces needed to grow and develop their businesses.

As far as cultural-cognitive institutional forces are concerned, the experiences of the Palestinian women illustrate the widespread prevalence of traditional gender roles and gendered expectations (Althalathini, Al-Dajani, and Apostolopou 2020) and the role they play in hindering their emancipation. Previous studies in Western contexts argue that digital technologies helped women attain flexible schedules to attend to business and to childcare responsibilities (Kamberidou 2020). Our findings show that the perseverance of traditional gender roles that consider a woman's primary responsibility to be that of caregiver and question her abilities to be an entrepreneur further reinforces the status quo. Palestinian women entrepreneurs thus continue to experience the multi-tasking whirlpool where they operate as full-time mothers and wives and full-time business owners. This study thus demonstrates how entrepreneurship using digital technologies has created an additional burden for Palestinian women, which ultimately reduced the time available for women to learn the business and digital skills (Jayawarna, Marlow, and Swail 2021) and caused them to experience physical health issues, emotional distress, and stress. This was more evident for women in extended families, who are responsible for household work.

Our findings, therefore, not only confirm widespread gendered expectations but also reveal how digital entrepreneurship did not fundamentally challenge existing gendered practices and cultural-cognitive institutions. They also demonstrate how digital entrepreneurship paved the way for cementing traditional gender roles, strengthened resistance to changing these roles, and ultimately exposed those women who demonstrated resistance to hostility and emotional abuse. To further explain, 22.4% of Palestinian men were unemployed in 2021 (PCBS-Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2022). Accordingly, more than a fifth of Palestinian men are failing to meet the cultural-cognitive institutionally endorsed gender roles that ascribe them to breadwinning. When these unemployed men realize that the women in their families (wives and sisters) are playing their role, their jealousy and insecurities surface, and are often expressed in the form of hostility and emotional abuse to their successful wives and sisters. To that end, we argue that when the regulatory and normative institutional voids of Palestine intersect with the patriarchal cultural-cognitive forces, digital entrepreneurship does not emancipate women or change traditional gender roles. It rather pushes men to resist gender changes, ignore the positive contributions of their wives and sisters, and drive them to respond with hostility towards these women. Therefore, we argue that for women with minimal access to resources and extensive domestic responsibilities to attend to, and in contexts plagued with regulatory and normative institutional voids and patriarchal cultural-cognitive institutional forces, digital entrepreneurship is a poorly rewarded form of work.

Collectively, the unstable political situation, the lack of regulatory support, and the prevailing cultural-cognitive institutions that promote traditional gender roles continue to confine women's choices to informal, traditional home-based enterprises and hinder their abilities to further grow their businesses and make significant changes in gender dynamics. Rindova et al. (2009) viewed entrepreneurship as emancipation through breaking free from the authority of another and removing constraints. Entrepreneurship for the Palestinian women in this study was not sought to gain autonomy but rather evolved as a necessary behaviour to ensure the survival of their families. Indeed, at the normative institutional level, digital technologies enabled women to enhance their social and human capital. However, none of the women in our study was 'emancipated' from the Israeli occupation and the consequences of its regulatory institutional presence such as oppression, checkpoints, blockade, and movement restrictions of goods and people. Similarly, digital entrepreneurship did not emancipate the Palestinian women from their cultural-cognitive institutional

context. Alternatively, the institutional context produced overburdened women entrepreneurs with more work and less well-being.

Contributions and suggestions for future research

Our study makes three key theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to the emerging literature on the influence of digital technologies on women's entrepreneurship (Dy, Martin, and Marlow 2018; McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison 2020; Oggero, Rossi, and Ughetto 2020; Ughetto et al. 2020) by questioning the assumed ease of creating and running a digital enterprise in conflict-laden countries that lack the necessary infrastructure. Our findings also shed light on the ongoing debate on the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship for women (e.g. Al-Dajani et al. 2015,; Rindova, Barry, and Ketchen 2009; Scott et al. 2012). By doing so, we are not claiming that digital technologies do not facilitate the process of business creation for Palestinian women but are casting doubt on the assumed universality of the positive consequences of digital technologies and questioning their contribution to women entrepreneurs' emancipation. In other words, one can argue that the Palestinian women utilized digital entrepreneurship to humanize themselves and to feel normal in the face of dehumanizing occupation and its consequences (e.g. Alvi, Prasad, and Segarra 2019). Accordingly, digital entrepreneurship did not provide freedom or emancipation from existing constraints as the women continued to experience limited individual autonomy and checkpoints and the blockade which negatively influenced them as women and professionals. Some might argue that by starting a digital home-based enterprise, the Palestinian women were emancipated by escaping existing structures such as restrictions on movement, checkpoints, and living in fear. While this might be a valid perspective, the Palestinian women had a different one. The Palestinian women entrepreneurs in this study saw digital technologies as a means to generate income to help their families survive and as tools for reducing their suffering with the challenges imposed by the Israeli occupation rather than an act of autonomy or emancipation. Accordingly, we argue that the extent to which women's emancipatory entrepreneurship is facilitated by digital technologies is *context-specific*. In other words, digital technologies' contribution to the lives of women, their businesses, and their emancipation occurs at the intersection with the national institutional variables that either support or hinder this contribution. By focusing on the experience of Palestinian women, we contribute to scholarly calls for more studies that explore women's entrepreneurship in conflict-laden contexts (Althalathini, Al-Dajani, and Apostolopoulos 2022; Bullough and Renko 2017; Sabella and El-Far 2019) and the influence of digital technologies on their lives and entrepreneurship (Bjørn and Boulus-Rødje 2018; Karaki 2021).

Second, by exploring the influence of the regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutions on women's digital entrepreneurship in Palestine, we advance research on Institutional Theory not only by demonstrating its contribution to advance our understanding of women's entrepreneurship in non-Western contexts (McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison 2019; Tlaiss 2019; Yousafzai, Saeed, and Muffatto 2015), but also its contribution in conflict-laden contexts (Althalathini, Al-Dajani, and Apostolopoulos 2022). By contextualizing the women's digital entrepreneurship within the national contexts, we demonstrate how the regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutions of Palestine unfold as barriers hindering the development and growth of women's digital entrepreneurship. Furthermore, we highlight the tension between digital technologies' potential for emancipation and the institutional forces that unfold as strong barriers hindering the Palestinian women from realizing this promised potential. In other words, by considering the contextual embeddedness of Palestinian women's entrepreneurship within the institutional forces that govern their lives and businesses, we demonstrate how the institutional environment reproduced constraints while limiting the potential of digital entrepreneurship to liberate women from these constraints (Jennings, Jennings, and Sharifian 2016). This is particularly important as we demonstrate how the gendered expectations promoted by the cultural-cognitive institutional forces

and the Palestinian women's attempt to conform to traditional gender roles not only counter-acts any emancipatory influence digital technologies exert, but also subjects them to physical problems, stress, emotional abuse, and hostility. While doing so, we emphasize the role that some cultural-cognitive events which are informal in nature, such as the virtual bazaar, play in fostering Palestinian women's digital entrepreneurship.

Third, we contribute to the emancipation literature (Ibáñez and Guerrero 2022; Rindova, Barry, and Ketchen 2009; Scott et al. 2012) by adding a layer of complexity and discussing emancipation using the lens of Institutional Theory. By extending the current debate on the emancipatory contribution of digital technologies (Dy, Martin, and Marlow 2018; Sharma 2022) to Palestinian women, we are extending the emancipation literature away from the Western contexts (Jennings, Jennings, and Sharifian 2016; McAdam and Marlow 2013) and privileged Arab Gulf contexts (Alkhaled and Berglund 2018; McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison 2019, 2020) to conflict-laden contexts (Bjørn and Boulus-Rødje 2018). We also extend the discussion beyond whether digital entrepreneurship actually emancipates women or not. Rather, we demonstrate that the absence of supportive regulatory and normative institutions not only prevents emancipation but also reinforces unsupportive cultural-cognitive institu-tions and gendered expectations. While previous studies have demonstrated how digital entrepreneurship might contribute to the emancipation of women entrepreneurs in the privileged Arab Gulf countries (i.e. McAdam, Crowley, and Harrison 2019, 2020), we not only question a) the potential of digital entrepreneurship to emancipate women who are resisting occupation and patriarchy and are driven by necessity in conflict-laden contexts, b) but also the proposition that women seek entrepreneurship for emancipation as we wonder if the Palestinian women entrepreneurs in this study were indeed seeking emancipation and autonomy as they pursued entrepreneurship out of necessity for the survival of their families. To that end, along with Castellanza (2022), we argue that emancipation can only be pursued after overcoming harsh political and economic constraints and societal prejudices. Accordingly, we further emphasize the embedded nature of entrepreneurship (Tlaiss 2019; Tlaiss and McAdam 2021; Yousafzai, Saeed, and Muffatto 2015) and the need to contextualize Arab women's entrepreneurship within the institutional specificities of the local contexts where it occurs.

This study provides valuable insights into the complexity of Arab women's digital entrepre-neurial experiences and the influence of institutional forces on these experiences. However, we are conscious of its limitations. First, as this study focused on women's digital entrepreneurship in Palestine, it focused on a single country-specific context and one group of entrepreneurs of the same gender. Future studies can therefore explore whether the influence of digital technologies on men is more emancipatory in conflict-laden contexts, especially those within the patriarchal, Arab region. Future studies can also conduct cross-country studies in other Arab countries suffering multiple crises, such as Lebanon and Sudan. Second, despite the contribution of Institutional Theory to this study, future studies are encouraged to explore more innovative theoretical frameworks, such as various forms of feminism to better under-stand how gender structures influence women's digital entrepreneurship at multiple levels and if and how they relate to micro-emancipation. Third, the Palestinian women in this study operated within the informal economy. We did not explore how the women are implicated by the conditions faced within an informal economy. Hence, we encourage future studies to explore informal economies and women's digital entrepreneurship in other conflict-laden contexts.

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Disclosure statement

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