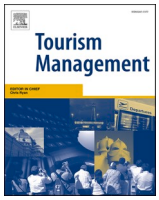
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Women entrepreneurs as cultural custodians in tourism: A social feminism theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study, grounded in social feminism theory, examines how women entrepreneurs in Cyprus use tourism enterprises to preserve and transmit cultural knowledge. Drawing on 26 semi-structured interviews, the research examines how participants balance economic goals with cultural responsibilities. The analysis identifies five interrelated themes, cultural identity, integration, advocacy, collaboration, and resilience, that inform a conceptual framework explaining how entrepreneurial agency is shaped by gendered social roles and expectations. By positioning women entrepreneurs as agents of transformative change, this study extends social feminism theory to include the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge as a critical dimension of entrepreneurial agency. By linking entrepreneurship to cultural stewardship, the study offers insights into how women deal with structural constraints while engaging in locally meaningful forms of sustainability. These findings offer implications for policymakers and development practitioners who seek to support gender-responsive, culturally rooted entrepreneurship in marginalised tourism contexts.

1. Introduction

Women play an increasingly significant role in cultural preservation and sustainability, particularly through entrepreneurship (Lindvert et al., 2024; Sinthumule, 2022). Across diverse regions and cultural contexts, women entrepreneurs are emerging as vital agents of cultural continuity, preserving traditional practices, knowledge, and heritage through their businesses (Ojong et al., 2021; Sinthumule, 2022). In sectors like tourism, women often leverage their unique knowledge of local culture and community needs, creating ventures that go beyond financial profit to embody social and cultural missions (Makandwa et al., 2023). Their businesses not only provide economic opportunities for themselves and their communities but also serve as vehicles for safeguarding cultural heritage and promoting sustainable practices.

This dual focus on economic development and cultural preservation highlights the potential for women-led enterprises to support sustainable development, cultural pride, and community resilience in both urban and rural areas (Filimonau et al., 2024; Seyfi et al., 2025). Literature on women entrepreneurship highlights the distinctive motivations, strategies, and challenges that women face, especially in cultural and sustainability-driven sectors (Makandwa et al., 2023; Ojong et al., 2021; Simba et al., 2024). Studies indicate that women are motivated by personal success, social responsibility and pride in their culture. They often see their businesses as supporting their families and communities (Brush et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2012; Seyfi et al., 2025). However, despite their contributions, women entrepreneurs encounter numerous gender-specific barriers, including limited access to financial resources, minimal institutional support, and societal expectations that challenge their roles as business leaders and entrepreneurs (Carrasco-Santos et al., 2024; Khoo et al., 2024; Kimbu and Ngoasong, 2016; Simba et al., 2023, 2024).

Research also shows that women frequently rely on informal support systems, such as family and community networks, due to gaps in formal entrepreneurial support and financing structures (Figueroa-Domecq

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et al., 2020, 2023; Kimbu et al., 2020; Seyfi et al., 2025; Sharifi-Tehrani et al., 2024; Simba et al., 2023). Although there is a growing body of research on women entrepreneurship, it tends to emphasise economic outcomes and barriers rather than exploring women's cultural contributions and non-financial goals such as heritage protection and community engagement. In particular, there is limited understanding of how women integrate cultural sustainability into entrepreneurship and how they balance authenticity with commercial objectives. Moreover, little empirical research explores the role of formal and informal support networks in enabling these culturally embedded goals (Sharifi-Tehrani et al., 2024).

These gaps highlight the need for a theoretical perspective that attends to women's lived experiences within structures of constraint and cultural responsibility. To address the aforementioned research gaps, this study aims to examine the experiences of women entrepreneurs who prioritise cultural preservation and sustainability within their businesses. Focusing on women-led enterprises in tourism, handicrafts, and related sectors in Cyprus, this research aims to understand the motivations behind these culturally and socially focused businesses, the support systems they rely on, and the gender-specific barriers they cope with. In response to calls for a feminist perspective in women entrepreneurship research (Galloway et al., 2015; Muntean and Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Seyfi et al., 2025; Sharifi-Tehrani et al., 2024), this study draws on social feminism theory to explain how societal norms and gender roles shape the entrepreneurial pathways of women (Huq et al., 2020; Kennedy, 2008). More specifically, the study also explores how women entrepreneurs define success beyond financial metrics, emphasising cultural preservation, community well-being, and sustainable practices as key indicators of their achievements. The study is guided by the following overarching question:

> How do women entrepreneurs in tourism engage in cultural stewardship through their ventures, and how do these practices reflect and respond to gendered expectations as theorised within social feminism?

Our study makes three contributions. First, it provides theoretically grounded empirical insight into how women use entrepreneurship as a tool for cultural transmission and sustainability. It shows that women entrepreneurs embed cultural knowledge in their business practices not only to generate income but also to safeguard traditions, practices, and identities that are otherwise at risk. Second, it develops a theoretical framework that links cultural stewardship to women's entrepreneurial strategies through five elements: cultural identity, integration, advocacy, collaboration, and resilience. This framework offers a way to understand how gendered responsibilities shape entrepreneurial agency in contexts where cultural continuity is a central concern. Third, it extends social feminism theory by situating entrepreneurial agency within the dual pressures of gendered expectations and cultural responsibilities in tourism. It demonstrates how women deal with structural constraints and create alternative measures of success grounded in community well-being, care work, and cultural preservation. The study also has implications for policy in contexts where heritage and gendered entrepreneurial initiatives come together, particularly in guiding support for women-led ventures that sustain cultural knowledge while addressing social and economic marginalisation.

2. Literature review and theoretical background

2.1. Women entrepreneurship in tourism

Research on women entrepreneurship has steadily moved beyond early economic models that focused narrowly on traits and performance to acknowledge the social, institutional, and cultural factors shaping women's business participation (Brush et al., 2006; Kimbu and Ngoasong, 2016; Seyfi et al., 2025). Scholars have consistently found that women face barriers distinct from those encountered by men, including unequal access to credit, exclusion from formal networks, gendered divisions of labour within households, and broader cultural expectations that frame entrepreneurship as a masculine pursuit (Khoo et al., 2024; Sharifi-Tehrani et al., 2024). These challenges are structural and deeply embedded in how women are socially positioned, often expected to balance unpaid domestic responsibilities with market participation. As a result, women's entry into entrepreneurship frequently occurs under constrained conditions, with implications for how and why they start and sustain businesses.

Recent research on women entrepreneurs in the Global South shows how informal financing mechanisms support women in overcoming these challenges. Studies by Simba et al. (2023, 2024) highlight Ajo, a rotating community-based credit scheme based on reciprocity, solidarity, and trust, which allows women to pool resources in the absence of formal financial support. These systems demonstrate how women rely on collective arrangements rather than individual access to institutional capital, especially in gender-biased markets. Similarly, Ojong et al. (2021) contend that women's entrepreneurial strategies are shaped by overlapping social, cultural, and economic factors, often leading to innovative adaptations that respond to local contexts and embedded expectations. This work confirms that women entrepreneurs are not merely constrained actors but are frequently engaged in relational strategies that combine survival with community building.

While financial independence and self-determination are certainly part of women's entrepreneurial motivations, an increasing body of research highlights how many women are also driven by non-economic goals: supporting community well-being, reinforcing social ties, and protecting cultural traditions (Elam and Terjesen, 2010; Hughes et al., 2012). These broader social objectives tend to be undervalued or even invisible in dominant entrepreneurship frameworks, which continue to prioritise scale, innovation, and financial metrics. Yet for many women, particularly in developing countries in the Global South, entrepreneurship offers a rare channel to pursue what Hughes et al. (2012) term "blended value", where economic activity is interwoven with care, cultural expression, and social obligation.

The tourism sector, in particular, has been positioned as a promising space for women entrepreneurship due to its relatively low entry barriers and its reliance on interpersonal service, cultural distinctiveness, and community embeddedness (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2023; Kimbu and Ngoasong, 2016). Tourism draws heavily on local narratives, symbolic resources, and place-based identity (Smith, 2015), domains where women, especially in rural communities, have traditionally played custodial roles (Sharifi-Tehrani et al., 2024). These include practices such as storytelling, craft production, ritual performance, and culinary traditions, which are not only valuable in themselves but increasingly marketable as part of heritage tourism products (Lindvert et al., 2024; Nwankwo, 2018).

While women's involvement in tourism is often highlighted (e.g., Cole, 2018; Pécot et al., 2024), scholarly discourse on their entrepreneurial roles reveals two notable limitations. First, existing research frequently lacks critical examination of how culture is utilised, adapted, or negotiated within entrepreneurial practices (Aleshinloye, 2024; Lindvert et al., 2024). The concept of cultural preservation is commonly accepted without scrutiny, seldom questioning who determines what constitutes heritage, how it is presented to outsiders, or the compromises involved in its commodification (Johnson, 2015; Nwankwo, 2018). Second, how gendered power structures shape women's participation in cultural tourism is seldom theorised (Lindvert et al., 2024). While some studies acknowledge barriers to market access or leadership (e.g., Lindvert et al., 2024; Seyfi et al., 2025), few explore how deeply embedded gender norms influence the type of cultural work women are allowed or expected to do. Thus, these gaps point to the need for more critical, theory-informed studies that explore how women engage in cultural entrepreneurship within tourism and how their work is shaped by both opportunity and constraint.

2.2. Theoretical lens: social feminism theory

Feminist theories have long challenged the gender-blind assumptions embedded in mainstream entrepreneurship research. While early feminist critiques focused on how dominant discourses positioned women as invisible or secondary within economic narratives, later approaches sought to actively re-theorise entrepreneurship from women's perspectives (Calas et al., 2009; Mirchandani, 1999). Among these approaches, social feminism has emerged as a particularly useful framework for understanding how women's entrepreneurial activities are shaped by social and institutional structures, as well as how these activities reflect gendered patterns of care, obligation, and community engagement (Huq et al., 2020; Jennings and Brush, 2013).

Rooted in broader traditions of socialist and structural feminism, social feminism posits that gendered inequality is not simply the product of individual bias or legal discrimination but arises from the interaction between patriarchy and capitalism (Tong and Botts, 2024). Women's unequal access to resources, opportunities, and recognition stems from how economic systems privilege masculine-coded behaviours (e.g., competition, autonomy, and risk-taking) while devaluing social reproduction, emotional labour, and community work, which are often associated with women's roles. Social feminism thus shifts attention from individual-level barriers to the social embeddedness of entrepreneurship, revealing how women's choices and constraints are shaped by family expectations, kinship obligations, cultural norms, and institutional exclusions (Kennedy, 2008).

In the context of entrepreneurship, this means rejecting explanations that attribute women's underrepresentation to a lack of ambition or competence and instead asking how structural inequalities shape what kinds of entrepreneurship are possible, visible, and supported. Social feminism also brings a relational lens to understanding business practice. Rather than treating entrepreneurship as an individual pursuit, it emphasises the interdependence between entrepreneurs and their social environments, and highlights the often invisible support systems, such as caregiving, domestic work, or informal labour, that make women's business participation possible (Brush et al., 2009; Chasserio et al., 2014).

Despite its relevance, the application of social feminism in tourism entrepreneurship research remains limited. Much of the literature continues to focus on women's marginality or empowerment in terms of income generation, decision-making power, or employment creation (e.g., Cole, 2018; Pécot et al., 2024), without fully interrogating the gendered cultural labour that underpins women's presence in tourism (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2020). This study addresses these aforementioned gaps by applying social feminism to analyse how women tourism entrepreneurs deal with gendered expectations, structural limitations, and cultural responsibilities. In doing so, the theory is not simply used to label women as disadvantaged, but to understand how their entrepreneurial practices emerge through socially patterned roles and values (Huq et al., 2020; Kennedy, 2008).

Through the theoretical lens of social feminism, we aim to examine how women's decisions (i.e., what to preserve, how to adapt cultural practices, who to collaborate with) are embedded in relations of care, obligation, and identity, rather than individual market logics (Huq et al., 2020). In applying social feminism, this study highlights the links between agency and structure in women entrepreneurship and recognises that women are not merely passive victims of constraint, nor heroic agents of change (Tong and Botts, 2024). Rather, their work in heritage preservation is shaped by the relational, gendered, and institutional contexts in which they operate (Johnson, 2015; Lindvert et al., 2024; Nwankwo, 2018).

2.3. Cultural entrepreneurship and cultural sustainability

Cultural entrepreneurship refers to the use of cultural knowledge, practices, and symbols in the creation of goods and services that are not only economically viable but also culturally expressive (Cruz et al., 2022; Lindvert et al., 2024). It shifts attention away from growth-oriented, innovation-centric models toward value systems rooted in identity, heritage, and social meaning. Entrepreneurs in this space engage not only in market exchange but in cultural labour, involving preservation, adaptation, and storytelling. In tourism, this often includes craft-making, heritage cuisine, performance, and other place-based practices that rely on symbolic cultural capital. Cultural entrepreneurship operates at the intersection of economic activity and heritage work, with women frequently positioned as informal custodians of cultural knowledge (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2020). Crucially, authenticity within cultural entrepreneurship is not a fixed attribute but a negotiated construct, shaped by audience expectations, local values, and entrepreneurial strategy.

Women tourism entrepreneurs often face competing pressures to deliver what tourists perceive as 'authentic', while also representing their culture with integrity and care. These decisions involve tension between visibility and simplification, preservation and commodification (Lindvert et al., 2024; Yin et al., 2024). Yet few studies explore how women deal with these trade-offs in practice, or how authenticity becomes a site of negotiation and agency rather than passive transmission. Cultural sustainability has emerged as a counterpoint to the commodification of culture in tourism (Adu-Ampong and Dillette, 2024; Shepherd, 2002). It refers to the ability of communities to maintain and adapt cultural heritage over time, in ways that are meaningful and responsive to changing contexts (Filimonau et al., 2024; Jamal et al., 2010).

Cultural sustainability emphasises intergenerational continuity, collective identity, and ethical transmission, principles often embodied in women's entrepreneurial practices but underexplored in literature. While some tourism scholarship acknowledges cultural sustainability, entrepreneurship research largely remains focused on financial or environmental concerns, overlooking how cultural meaning is shaped through business (Lindvert et al., 2024; Seyfi et al., 2025). This study addresses these gaps by centring gendered cultural labour in tourism entrepreneurship. It examines how women strategically mobilise cultural knowledge, tangible and intangible, not only as a market asset, but as a vehicle for care, continuity, and community accountability. In doing so, we contribute to emerging work that reconceptualises entrepreneurship as a site of cultural production, where authenticity is negotiated, not inherited, and where entrepreneurial value is generated through embeddedness, social responsibility, and interpretive labour.

2.4. Gendered cultural work in tourism entrepreneurship

Efforts to understand women entrepreneurship in tourism have traditionally focused on structural challenges, economic barriers, or empowerment outcomes (Brush et al., 2009; Kimbu and Ngoasong, 2016). While these areas remain important, they often overlook the cultural dimensions of entrepreneurial practice, especially in contexts where heritage, identity, and communal obligations are central to tourism products and services. In such contexts, cultural identity, understood as a dynamic and negotiated sense of belonging shaped by history, place, and power relations, plays a foundational role in shaping women's tourism ventures (Makandwa et al., 2023). It informs not only the type of cultural material women work with, such as food, textiles, or rituals, but also the way they position their businesses in relation to their communities (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2020; Makandwa et al., 2023).

Much of the literature, however, tends to treat identity in general terms or as a stable category, often overlooking how cultural identity is actively constructed through practice. Entrepreneurs make deliberate choices about how to represent culture, what to preserve or adapt, and which audiences to address (Seyfi et al., 2025). These decisions are embedded in broader gendered dynamics, as women often carry the burden of cultural reproduction while dealing with market expectations and community accountability. Understanding how cultural identity is shaped and mobilised is therefore central to understanding women's

motivations and the cultural meaning of their enterprises.

A growing body of research on cultural entrepreneurship sheds light on how traditional knowledge is embedded in business models, not only as marketable content but as a reflection of lived histories and social roles (Lindvert et al., 2024; Nwankwo, 2018). This work highlights how women draw on cultural repertoires in designing products, crafting experiences, and building narratives of authenticity and care. Yet the mechanisms of this cultural integration, how practices are selected, adapted, or constrained, are rarely unpacked. Our study takes up this task by examining how women entrepreneurs use cultural identity as both a resource and a responsibility, making choices that reflect their embeddedness in gendered and local conditions.

Although often overlooked, tourism businesses frequently act as platforms for cultural advocacy. Women in particular have been noted to use their businesses to raise awareness about endangered traditions, to correct misrepresentations of their culture, or to support the transmission of heritage through education and storytelling (Su et al., 2023). In these instances, business becomes more than a livelihood; it becomes a voice. Yet literature still tends to frame these efforts in terms of marketing rather than advocacy, neglecting the political and representational labour involved in shaping how culture is understood and valued both within and beyond the community. Moreover, women's businesses in tourism are often collaborative by necessity and design. In contexts with limited access to formal capital or institutional support, women frequently build enterprises through kinship ties, cooperative production, and informal exchange systems (Brush et al., 2009; Chasserio et al., 2014). This collaborative orientation reflects more than resource constraints; it is rooted in local value systems that emphasise shared responsibility, reciprocity, and the collective nature of cultural production (Sharifi-Tehrani et al., 2024). Finally, there is growing recognition that cultural entrepreneurs must constantly adapt their practices to remain viable (Lindvert et al., 2024). In tourism, this includes adjusting to shifting tourist expectations, regulatory pressures, or political disruptions. For women, the stakes are particularly high, as their work is often embedded in family livelihoods, community reputation, and gendered obligations (Carrasco-Santos et al., 2024; Cole, 2018).

The concept of cultural resilience offers a useful lens for understanding how women deal with these tensions, finding ways to maintain the integrity of cultural knowledge while responding to external demands (Filimonau et al., 2024). Nevertheless, most studies frame resilience in economic or psychological terms (Bagheri et al., 2023; Prayag et al., 2020), rarely considering the interpretive and curatorial labour involved in maintaining cultural meaning under changing conditions. This study aims to provide new insights into our understanding of how women entrepreneurs in tourism use their businesses to preserve and transmit cultural knowledge within gendered and socio-cultural contexts (Aleshinloye, 2024; Lindvert et al., 2024). In this paper, cultural sustainability refers to the long-term maintenance and transmission of cultural knowledge, symbols, practices, and identities within communities through economic activities (Soini and Birkeland, 2014). A related concern is cultural authenticity, which we understand not as fixed or essentialised traditions (Greenwood, 1982; Mccartney and Osti, 2007), but as meanings negotiated by local actors, often women, who draw on lived experiences to construct credible and legitimate expressions of their heritage (Lindvert et al., 2024). While men also participate in tourism entrepreneurship, women tend to bear greater responsibility for safeguarding cultural memory in households and communities, often through unpaid or under-recognised labour. This gendered pattern of cultural work warrants focused attention (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2020; Kimbu and Ngoasong, 2016). Fig. 1 displays the literature review map of the study. It has guided us through the fieldwork and informed the analysis of the findings.

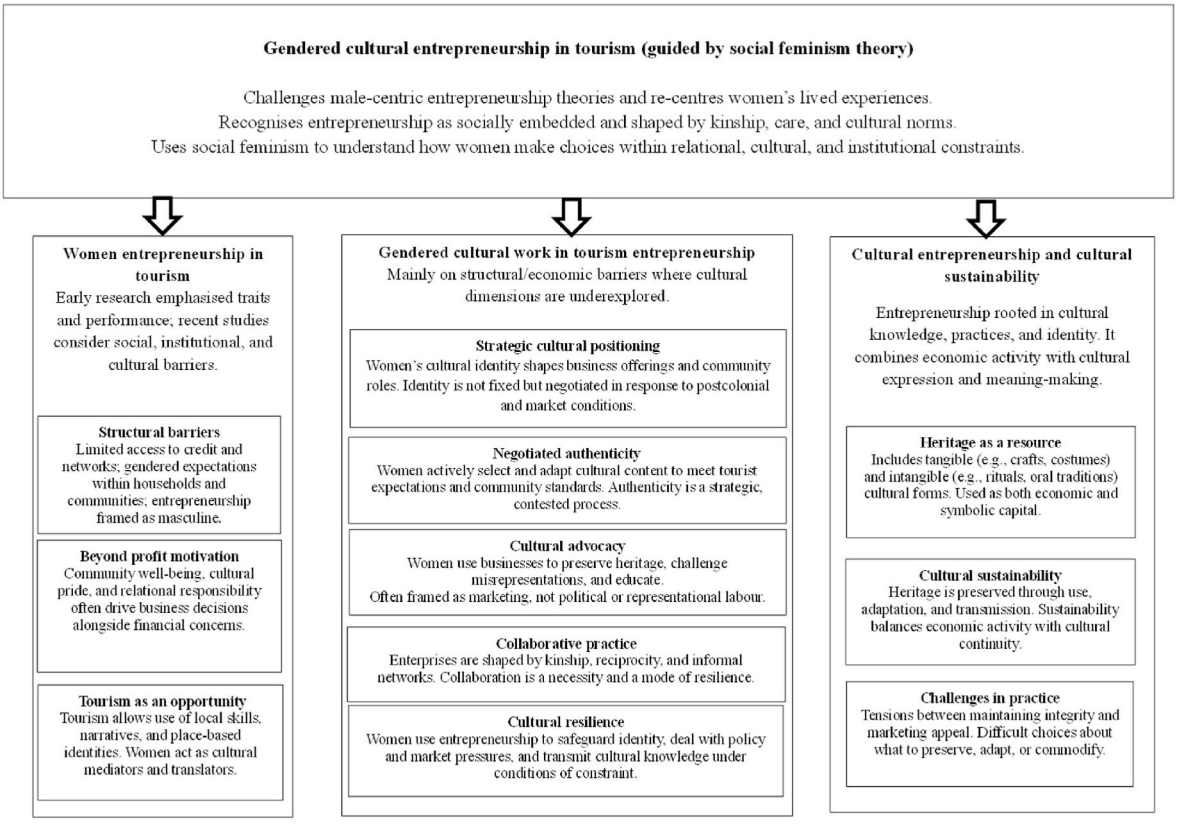


Fig. 1. Conceptual and analytical framework of the study.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design and approach

In line with the aims of the study, to explore how women entrepreneurs preserve cultural heritage through tourism, we adopted a qualitative research design with thematic coding (Denzin, 2008). Our approach relied on multiple cycles of analysis, guided by key theoretical ideas from recent literature (Bagheri et al., 2023; Seyfi et al., 2025; Sharifi-Tehrani et al., 2024). The study builds on Oliveira et al. (2024), who critique disembodied and gender-neutral portrayals of entrepreneurship. Their call for more situated and embodied analyses shaped both our design and interpretation. We focus on women's lived experiences within institutional and cultural settings that constrain and shape entrepreneurial practice.

Aligned with an interpretivist epistemology, we treat reality as socially constructed and accessed through the subjective accounts of women entrepreneurs (Chatterjee et al., 2022).

We conducted semi-structured interviews to explore how participants deal with institutional norms and market pressures while preserving cultural knowledge. Drawing on feminist phenomenology (Oliveira et al., 2024), we focused on how cultural values, care work, and community obligations shape entrepreneurial decision-making. This approach avoids viewing gender as a fixed variable and instead treats it as embedded in lived experience. Our research is also grounded in a subjectivist ontology (Remenyi et al., 1998), which views knowledge as shaped by meaning-making processes rather than detached observation. This stance was essential for examining how women resist dominant expectations and articulate success through cultural pride, continuity, and social contribution rather than financial growth alone. The design responds to Oliveira et al.'s (2024) critique of mainstream entrepreneurship research, which often overlooks the gendered structuring of opportunity and support.

The choice of tourism as the focal industry is purposeful, as it offers unique opportunities for women entrepreneurs to blend cultural heritage preservation with economic activities (Lindvert et al., 2024). The tourism sector, recognised for its potential to empower women (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2020; Moswete and Lacey, 2015) and for its role as a core economic driver (Zuo and Huang, 2018), provides an ideal setting to explore how entrepreneurial activities can sustain and celebrate cultural traditions while addressing socio-cultural and economic challenges. In particular, Cyprus provides a relevant empirical setting due to its dependence on tourism, its layered cultural history, and the gendered norms that continue to shape economic participation. As a small island economy, it highlights the constraints and possibilities of place-bound entrepreneurship (Booth et al., 2020; Scheyvens and Momsen, 2008). It also brings into focus how women use local knowledge, heritage skills, and community ties to build businesses that carry cultural significance. In selecting this context, we respond to recent feminist calls for deeper engagement with place, social positioning, and the ethics of care in entrepreneurial research.

3.2. Sampling and data collection

We employed purposive sampling to identify women entrepreneurs in Cyprus whose ventures actively engage with cultural heritage (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007). Participants were selected based on demonstrable practices such as using traditional production methods (e.g., halloumi-making, handicrafts, Cypriot cuisine), restoring heritage buildings, hosting cultural workshops, and promoting intergenerational knowledge transfer and storytelling. These women contribute to both local economies and the preservation of cultural identity, aligning with the study's focus on culturally embedded entrepreneurship. Eligibility was centred on women who incorporate traditional knowledge into their operations and act as cultural role models within their communities. While not all participants identified as cultural entrepreneurs, their business activities reflected a sustained commitment to cultural preservation.

This sampling strategy aligns with our use of social feminism theory to explore how gendered expectations shape entrepreneurial roles in cultural labour (Huq et al., 2020; Kennedy, 2008). A total of 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted between June and August 2024 across various sectors, including heritage accommodation, Cypriot food and sweets, handicrafts, and local agriculture. Table 1 summarises the socio-demographic profile of participants. The diversity of ventures allowed us to examine a range of entrepreneurial practices connected to heritage preservation. The interview guide was developed in line with social feminism theory (Huq et al., 2020; Kennedy, 2008) and piloted with selected participants. Core themes included entrepreneurial motivation, the influence of social networks, the integration of cultural identity, and the strategies used to manage gender-specific barriers.

The interview questions guided informants to elaborate on key topics, including their motivations for starting their business, including financial goals, personal achievement, or social responsibility; the role of family, friends, and formal or informal networks in supporting their venture; and how they leveraged these networks to advance both business and cultural objectives. They were also asked about the skills they utilised in combining entrepreneurial practices with cultural preservation, the challenges they faced due to gender-specific barriers, and the strategies they employed to navigate these barriers.

Further, informants were asked to reflect on their feelings about empowerment as women entrepreneurs, their views on their societal roles beyond running a business, and their contributions to preserving cultural heritage. Questions also explored their business's incorporation of sustainable practices, the role of government in supporting such businesses, and their perceptions of why women entrepreneurs in this sector are often under-supported.

Additionally, informants shared how they define success for culturally driven businesses, their succession plans, and advice for aspiring entrepreneurs in similar fields. Throughout the interviews, we encouraged informants to share their stories and experiences, remaining open to emerging issues and unexpected insights (see also Appendix 1 for the interview questions).

Interviewing remained flexible to allow new insights to emerge. Data saturation was reached when no new patterns appeared in subsequent interviews (Miles and Huberman, 1994). All interviews were conducted

Table 1
Profile of interviewees.

Participant Name	Age	Education	Type of Business
Perihan	72	University	Heritage accommodation
Birgül	60	University	Heritage accommodation
Hatice	62	University	Culture House
Emel	62	University	Heritage restaurant
Loise	72	University	Heritage accommodation
Fatma	62	University	Halloumi producer
Ege	52	PhD	Heritage accommodation
Şenay	75	High School	Cypriot handicraft shop
Sevil	80	High School	Cypriot handicraft shop
Seniha	28	University	Heritage food
Ruzen	58	University	Heritage Gallery
Gönül	67	High School	Handicraft
Sultan	66	High School	Heritage accommodation
Mebrure	70	University	Farming
Birsel	67	Primary school	Halloumi producer
Ayten	48	Primary school	Traditional sweets
Nafia	49	PhD	Heritage accommodation
Elif	43	Primary school	Heritage restaurant
Aslıhan	45	University	Halloumi producer
Şerif	61	University	Traditional candied fruit
Bengül	55	High School	Handicraft
Ebru	49	Primary school	Basket weaving
Ayşegül	30	University	Lavender production
Leman	62	High School	Artisanal craft
Zekiye	72	Primary School	Handicraft

in the participants' preferred language, transcribed, translated into English, and anonymised. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional board, and informed consent was secured from all participants in line with established ethical protocols.

3.3. Data analysis

We conducted thematic analysis using a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Deductive codes were drawn from established literature on women entrepreneurship and cultural heritage (e.g., Cruz et al., 2022; Hughes et al., 2012; Kimbu et al., 2020; Lindvert et al., 2024), focusing on themes such as cultural identity, motivation, gendered barriers, and community networks. Inductive coding allowed themes to emerge directly from the data, ensuring sensitivity to the lived experiences of participants and the specific cultural context of Cyprus (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This dual approach enabled us to build on existing frameworks while identifying patterns unique to this study. We employed the Gioia methodology to structure the analysis, moving from first-order codes grounded in informant language to second-order themes that reflect broader theoretical constructs (Gioia et al., 2013).

This process enabled the development of an empirically grounded understanding of how women entrepreneurs engage in cultural heritage preservation through their business practices. To strengthen analytical rigour, we adopted several strategies. First, transcript accuracy was validated through participant transcript reviews (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Second, coding consistency was ensured through double-coding and team discussions (Harley and Cornelissen, 2022). The research team included two Cypriot and two international scholars with backgrounds in gender studies, tourism, and qualitative research. This mix allowed for both insider and outsider perspectives, improving reflexivity and interpretive depth. We also maintained reflexive journals to document positionality and decision-making during analysis (Corlett and Mavin, 2018). Regular discussions helped address researcher bias, and member checks with selected participants were used to validate emerging themes. Together, these measures ensured a transparent, contextually situated, and theoretically informed analysis.

3.4. Coding process

Our coding process followed a stepwise strategy grounded in Gioia et al. (2013) and informed by grounded theory principles (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014). We began with data familiarisation, during which three researchers reviewed all transcripts to identify recurring concepts related to cultural heritage preservation. Reflexive journals (Corlett and Mavin, 2018) were used throughout this stage to acknowledge researcher positionality and ensure transparency. Open coding followed, where discrete text segments were labelled with first-order codes such as "traditional practices" and "community support." These codes reflected the fine-grained realities of participants' entrepreneurial practices. Through axial coding, we identified patterns and relationships among these codes, grouping them into broader conceptual categories, such as merging "cultural knowledge" and "traditional skills" under "cultural integration." Team discussions and triangulation with existing literature informed this phase, enhancing reliability. Selective coding refined the axial categories into core themes that represent the study's key contributions, such as "cultural advocacy" and "cultural resilience."

The Gioia method was followed to link empirical observations to theoretical categories. In the categorisation phase, we developed clear definitions for each theme, ensuring internal consistency and conceptual precision. The final step involved integrating the themes into a cohesive framework that explains how women entrepreneurs preserve cultural heritage through interconnected strategies. This integration was guided by reflexive memos and further reviewed against relevant literature (e.g., Brush et al., 2009; Lindvert et al., 2024; Makandwa et al., 2023; Seyfi et al., 2025) to ensure coherence. Table 2 presents the relationships between axial codes, selective codes, and the final themes, which underpin the structure of our analytical framework.

4. Findings

Our findings reveal a multidimensional framework through which women entrepreneurs preserve cultural heritage. Each identified theme, manifested by cultural motivation and inspiration, cultural practices in business operations, promotion and education of cultural heritage, community involvement and collaboration, and challenges in preserving cultural heritage demonstrates the complex ways these entrepreneurs sustain and adapt their heritage within a modern context.

4.1. Theme 1. cultural motivation and inspiration

Cultural sustainability emerged as a central source of motivation and identity for the women entrepreneurs interviewed. Their businesses were frequently described not only as economic ventures but as moral and affective commitments to cultural transmission. Emel reflected this sentiment when she explained, "*The ultimate goal is to ensure that our cultural heritage is not just remembered but actively lived and appreciated by future generations.*" Similarly, informants emphasised the need for sustainable business models that protect traditional practices while adapting to modern economic and social frameworks. For instance, Ebru stated, "*I am dedicated to creating a business that not only thrives financially*

Table 2
Coding process.

Step	Description	Action Taken	Output
Data Familiarisation	Initial immersion in the data to get a broad understanding of the content and context.	All responses were thoroughly read multiple times, making initial notes on recurring ideas related to cultural heritage preservation.	Broad ideas were identified, such as *cultural motivation, traditional practices, and community involvement*.
Open Coding	Breaking down the data into distinct codes that represent key concepts and ideas.	Open codes were assigned to specific segments of text that mention cultural identity, traditional practices, community support, challenges, etc.	Initial codes: *Cultural Identity, Traditional Practices, Community Support, Economic Viability*.
Axial Coding	Relating open codes to each other by identifying relationships and organising them around central concepts.	Related codes were grouped under broader categories that illustrate how they interact or support each other.	Axial Codes: *Cultural Integration* (combining Traditional Practices and Cultural Identity), *Cultural Advocacy* (linking Promotion and Education).
Selective Coding	Integrating and refining the axial codes to develop a cohesive narrative that aligns with the research question.	Core categories that represent the overarching themes were identified, ensuring they reflect the essence of how women entrepreneurs preserve cultural heritage.	Selective Codes: *Cultural Resilience, Cultural Sustainability, Cultural Advocacy, Cultural Collaboration*.
Categorisation	Defining and organising the selective codes into final themes that answer the research question.	Clear, distinct categories (themes) from the selective codes were developed, with detailed definitions and descriptions for each.	Final Themes: *Cultural Identity, Cultural Integration, Cultural Advocacy, Cultural Collaboration, Cultural Resilience*
Integration into Framework	Creating a holistic framework that synthesises the themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research question.	A conceptual model was constructed showing how the themes interact and contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage, with a focus on how resilience enhances sustainability.	Holistic Framework: Integration of all themes into a cohesive model for cultural heritage preservation, illustrating the dynamic interplay between resilience and sustainability.

but also serves as a beacon for cultural preservation in our community." Informants see themselves as stewards of cultural heritage, striving to leave a legacy that future generations can maintain.

This notion of entrepreneurship as a form of intergenerational responsibility, deeply embedded in personal and collective memory, aligns with social feminist scholarship that interprets women's entrepreneurial labour as socially embedded, relational, and motivated by care (Brush et al., 2009; Huq et al., 2020). The findings of our study go further than the existing literature by demonstrating the relationship between social feminist driven entrepreneurship and family culture and heritage.

Several participants described how their connection to place and family history shaped their entry into entrepreneurship. For instance, Ebru noted, "*My love for Cypriot culture inspired me to start a business that would keep our traditions alive through crafts and local products*." Similarly, Bengül invoked her grandmother's influence: "*The memory of my grandmother, who was a master of traditional crafts, motivated me to continue her work and share it with the world*." These narratives highlight how entrepreneurial identity is forged not simply through market strategy but through affective ties to heritage, often framed in familial and gendered terms. These cultural values are so strongly embedded that sometimes it can be shared and expressed with 'patriotic feelings and terms. For example, Fatma expressed concern that "*new-generation entrepreneurs will not deviate from production tied to our traditions*," reflecting a protective stance toward heritage that may limit adaptation. Similarly, Perihan described cultural work as a patriotic duty: "*Doing something on behalf of our society, our country, our land, and our identity is at the forefront*." While such expressions reinforce the ethical and emotional dimensions of entrepreneurship, they also point to a normative ideal of authenticity that may not leave room for commercial improvisation or strategic revision.

From a social feminist perspective, these narratives show how women's entrepreneurship is deeply entangled with the burden of cultural stewardship. This burden, framed as both a moral obligation and a social expectation, is gendered. Aslihan's advice that new entrepreneurs "*research society and culture … and take action accordingly*" implies an inherited responsibility to embody and represent tradition with fidelity.

4.2. Theme 2: cultural practices in business operations

Cultural integration emerged as a key site of entrepreneurial practice, characterised by the deliberate incorporation of traditional knowledge, skills, and symbols into business operations. Informants described this process as both a strategy for differentiation and a form of cultural responsibility. This aligns with feminist readings of entrepreneurship as embedded in care work, relational obligations, and identity preservation (Brush et al., 2009; Huq et al., 2020). Zekiye, for instance, stated, *"My business is deeply rooted in the use of traditional recipes and methods passed down through generations, which keeps our culinary heritage alive."* Others highlighted how cultural practices are embedded in materials, design, and storytelling. Leman noted, *"Every product I create carries a piece of our history, whether it's in the materials, techniques, or stories behind them."* These examples show how cultural labour becomes integral to branding, production, and value creation. At the same time, such practices reinforce women's role as bearers of heritage, which Lindvert et al. (2024) describe as the feminised burden of cultural continuity. The findings of the study go further than the existing literature and demonstrate that innovation driven entrepreneurial activities are also embedded within the cultural values and heritage leading to the preservation of cultural heritage and sustainability.

The importance of balancing tradition and innovation surfaced across multiple interviews. Nafia articulated this principle directly: *"It's important to add contemporary designs and modern ideas, but the secret of success is to not forget your roots."* Her approach, blending heritage décor with staff training in local traditions and offering activities such as halloumi-making and olive-picking, demonstrates how authenticity is actively constructed. Others emphasised how specific practices carry symbolic and emotional meaning while remaining economically viable. Ayten spoke of her culinary work as preservation, saying, *"With my pastiş and bulgur köftesi that stay true to our traditions, I contribute to preserving our cultural heritage."* Meanwhile, Mebrure described her innovation with mustard seed products: *"I have grown a product to give due recognition to the mustard seed, which is abundant in our country."* These narratives and stories illustrate how cultural integration is not only about conservation but also reinterpretation and renewal, particularly in resource-constrained environments where women must constantly adapt.

Social feminism helps illuminate the underlying importance of culturally driven innovations in entrepreneurial activities. Women's entrepreneurial labour is situated at the intersection of cultural expectations, gendered responsibility, and cultural viability. Their businesses become sites where cultural care and innovation are simultaneously amalgamated. Rather than seeing cultural integration as static or celebratory, these findings suggest that women entrepreneurs are continually performing interpretive work, deciding what to preserve as they innovate, how to adapt as they innovate, and how to preserve cultural heritage through cultural values and heritage innovations.

4.3. Theme 3. promotion and education of cultural heritage

Cultural advocacy emerged as a key entrepreneurial practice through which women sought not only to preserve heritage but to actively reinterpret and disseminate it. Informants described using their businesses as platforms for educating both local and tourist audiences, positioning themselves not merely as producers of cultural goods but as facilitators of cultural knowledge. These practices align with feminist understandings of entrepreneurship as embedded in community care, identity labour, and intergenerational responsibility (Chasserio et al., 2014; Huq et al., 2020). Birgül's story demonstrates this orientation: *"Through my business, I organise workshops that teach traditional Cypriot crafts to younger generations, ensuring our heritage is passed down."* Her initiative reflects a deliberate pedagogical strategy, where the business becomes a site of cultural reproduction. This goes beyond commercial entrepreneurship; it constitutes a form of cultural stewardship grounded in the gendered labour of education and mentoring.

From a social feminist perspective, such labour, often informal and unremunerated, challenges dominant metrics of entrepreneurial success by centring legacy and social reproduction over profit. Other informants echoed this didactic role. Lois explained, *"Educating the public about the cultural significance of our products is as important as the products themselves."* Her equal emphasis on meaning-making and material production illustrates what scholars describe as narrative agency, the ability to shape how heritage is interpreted and valued (Kennedy, 2008). By engaging tourists not as consumers but as learners, these entrepreneurs challenge transactional models of tourism and promote a more ethical, context-aware mode of cultural exchange. These findings go beyond the existing literature on feminist understanding of entrepreneurship and demonstrate its dynamic, processual and multi-stakeholder driven nature.

Feminist understanding of entrepreneurship involves the process of cultural knowledge transmission, education of tourist, local residents and new generations. The findings of our study also demonstrated that promotion and education of cultural heritage could only be achieved through collaboration with schools and cultural centers. Emel described how she *"collaborates with schools and cultural centers to host events that highlight the importance of our traditional crafts and practices."* Such partnerships extend the reach of entrepreneurial advocacy and reflect a communal approach to sustainability. Here, cultural knowledge becomes a shared resource, distributed across generations and institutional contexts. Yet these efforts also speak to the under-recognised burden placed on women to animate and safeguard community values, a burden magnified by institutional neglect and commercial pressures. Some participants connected advocacy to the preservation of place-based

traditions. Birsel emphasised the importance of preserving historic sites and intangible practices like wine and zivania production: *"They should make a determined effort to protect these values."* Similarly, Ruzen described her transformation of a Venetian-period building into a workshop and gallery as both a preservation act and a site of cultural activation. These examples reinforce the idea that entrepreneurship in this context involves curatorial and spatial labour, decisions about what to save, how to present it, and how to make it meaningful to both locals and visitors.

Importantly, advocacy was not only professional but also framed as moral. Birgül described volunteering as a civic responsibility: *"I feel it is important to share one's time, skills, and knowledge with people. This helps preserve and pass on cultural heritage."* This view positions cultural work within an ethic of care and reciprocity, key tenets of feminist entrepreneurship theory that value relational labour over competitive individualism (Brush et al., 2009). While these stories highlight commitment and innovation, they also expose tensions between educational goals and the demands of tourism markets. Aslıhan noted, *"Tourists should be informed about what to buy … telling the stories behind the products."* This call to shape consumer behaviour reflects both a desire to protect heritage from commodification and a recognition of tourists' interpretive power. The burden of this narrative labour, of shaping how others perceive and value culture, falls disproportionately on women, who must balance authenticity, clarity, and commercial appeal.

4.4. Theme 4: community involvement and collaboration with community

Cultural collaboration emerged as a defining feature of the entrepreneurial practices described by informants, revealing the centrality of community embeddedness in the preservation of cultural heritage. Rather than positioning themselves as autonomous creators, many women described their ventures as collective projects, grounded in reciprocity, shared labour, and gendered solidarity. This emphasis on collaboration aligns with social feminist theory, which emphasises the interdependence of entrepreneurial activity and the social environments that sustain it (Brush et al., 2009; Chasserio et al., 2014). The findings of our study go further than the existing literature and demonstrate that collaboration is achieved through the direct involvement of the community.

Perihan articulated the direct involvement of the community clearly: *"My community plays a crucial role in my business; we work together to keep our cultural traditions alive through cooperative efforts."* Her framing suggests that entrepreneurship is not a solitary pursuit but a socially distributed practice. These forms of involvement, often informal and undervalued in mainstream economic approaches, reflect what feminist theorists describe as relational labour, understood as work shaped by care, kinship ties, and cultural responsibility (Huq et al., 2020). Informants described both formal and informal involvements, including cooperatives, shared craft networks, and knowledge exchange with neighbours. Şerif explained, *"We formed a cooperative where each member brings their unique craft, and together, we create a collective that represents the richness of our culture."* This cooperative model resists individualised market logics by emphasising collective agency and mutual support. The cooperative becomes not just a business structure, but a vessel for intergenerational knowledge, cultural resilience, and local autonomy. It reflects a feminist re-imagining of entrepreneurship as community care, rather than competition.

Others described how friendship networks and neighbourly support formed the bedrock of their ventures. Emine noted, *"Some of my close friends and neighbours helped by sharing their skills and knowledge, which has been crucial in keeping our traditions alive."* These involvements and collaborations are significant not only for their functional support but also for their affective and symbolic value. They express a shared commitment to cultural continuity, held together by trust and mutual obligation, principles that are often invisible in dominant entrepreneurial narratives but are central to women's economic lives. Ayşe described how mobilising support from a women's cooperative helped elevate her business goals: *"Knowing the importance given to producing women, we reached out, and their motivation to* support *me was driven by the diversity and local nature of our products."* Her emphasis on being recognised as a woman producer illustrates how gendered validation serves as a source of motivation and legitimacy. In contexts where formal institutions offer limited support, these informal and gender-conscious networks operate as alternative entrepreneurial infrastructures.

While these narratives demonstrate the strength of community collaboration, they also reflect the tensions of dependency and responsibility. Shared cultural labour requires emotional, temporal, and often unpaid investment. Women carry not only the operational burden of their businesses but also the symbolic weight of safeguarding communal heritage. From a social feminist standpoint, this dual role is not merely a strength; it is also a pressure, shaped by structural neglect and normative expectations about women's roles in cultural continuity.

In this way, cultural collaboration emerges not just as a practical strategy but as a feminist response to marginalisation, one that contests the individualism of mainstream entrepreneurship and affirms community, reciprocity, and embedded agency as central to cultural sustainability.

4.5. Theme 5. challenges in preserving cultural heritage

While cultural heritage was central to the entrepreneurial missions of participants, the process of sustaining it was fraught with contradictions. Informants consistently emphasised the tension between staying true to tradition and remaining viable in competitive markets shaped by mass production, shifting demographics, and consumer trends. These pressures required ongoing negotiation, revealing the limits of idealised authenticity under commercial and social constraints. Leman expressed this tension directly: *"One of the biggest challenges is modernising my business while staying true to our cultural roots, as there is a growing disinterest in traditional practices."* Her comment illustrates how women entrepreneurs are tasked with more than business management; they carry the symbolic weight of cultural preservation in environments where heritage is increasingly devalued. From a social feminist perspective, this challenge reflects the gendered burden of cultural labour, which is both expected and under-supported.

Zekiye responded to this dilemma by strategically framing cultural uniqueness as a market advantage: *"It's difficult to compete with mass-produced goods, but by emphasising the cultural value and uniqueness of our products, we manage to sustain our business."* Her strategy shows how women deal with negotiated authenticity, leveraging heritage as a form of ethical differentiation rather than replication. However, this positioning is inherently unstable, as the marketability of culture depends on both consumer interest and the entrepreneur's capacity to balance heritage with adaptation. This balancing act was a recurring theme. Ayşegül remarked, *"Maintaining the authenticity of our cultural practices while adapting to changing market demands has been a constant balancing act."* Her use of "authenticity" signals that cultural content is not static but negotiated through daily decisions, echoing your study's conceptualisation of cultural sustainability as interpretive labour. These women are not simply transmitting traditions; they are curating them under economic and social pressures.

Other participants pointed to broader structural forces that reinforce these difficulties. Mebrure highlighted demographic shifts: *"The challenges of preserving cultural heritage include competing with people from every culture … As we become a minority, it becomes harder to preserve our cultural heritage."* Her story reflects a form of cultural displacement, where local identity becomes marginalised within increasingly diverse or globalised urban spaces. This situates cultural entrepreneurship as a form of resistance, one that protects cultural meaning amid broader social erasure. Ruzen added another dimension, connecting cultural loss

to societal stagnation: *"The greatest challenge is the lack of transformation in society, the absence of a sense of belonging."* Her reflection reframes entrepreneurship as a pedagogical act, where cultural work also becomes a strategy for re-embedding community values. Her efforts to instil care and environmental awareness in others reflect the extended role women often play as cultural educators, a role undervalued in conventional accounts of entrepreneurship.

Finally, Ayten shared the emotional cost of cultural entrepreneurship, stating, *"My biggest challenge is wanting to do everything myself. I believe that the taste in my food comes from my own hands."* This illustrates a deeply embodied notion of authenticity that resists delegation. Yet it also highlights the personal exhaustion embedded in heritage work when labour is gendered, informal, and tightly bound to individual identity.

Whilst offering support to the social feminist scholarship by providing empirical evidence for the social and culturally embedded entrepreneurship (Brush et al., 2009; Huq et al., 2020), the findings of this study also demonstrate the tension between the cultural and economic realms of today's society. The findings of our study go further than existing literature and demonstrate that feminised burden of cultural continuity could be 'sacrificed' when entrepreneurial activities need to meet the realms of today's economic environment. Theorists have described this as negotiated authenticity (Makandwa et al., 2023), where entrepreneurs must continuously adapt heritage practices to appeal to modern audiences without undermining their cultural integrity. The stories and narratives of women entrepreneurs often idealise cultural continuity in ways that may conceal the tensions between maintaining authenticity and ensuring market viability. Authenticity is not fixed. It is negotiated, shaped by what can be preserved under conditions of economic precarity, tourist expectations, and institutional neglect. While women's motivations are framed through legacy and care, these commitments are embedded in structural pressures that are not always visible in the celebratory language of heritage work.

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1. Analysis of findings

Our findings present five interconnected components, cultural identity, cultural integration, cultural advocacy, cultural collaboration, and cultural resilience, that collectively define how women entrepreneurs embed cultural preservation into their ventures (Table 3). Drawing on social feminism theory (Huq et al., 2020), the analysis emphasises how gender roles, structural constraints, and situated agency shape these efforts. This approach moves away from conventional entrepreneurship research focused on profit and growth, instead reframing women as agents of cultural transmission. In so doing, our study challenges the dominant economistic discourse that frames women entrepreneurship as underperformance relative to male norms (Calás et al., 2009) and instead positions cultural preservation as an equally legitimate entrepreneurial outcome.

Cultural identity serves as the cornerstone of women entrepreneurs' endeavours, as they draw inspiration from their heritage, shaped by gendered socialisation processes that emphasise community values and cultural stewardship. Social feminism theory posits that gendered socialisation emphasises community values and cultural stewardship, which was evident in the deep connection informants expressed toward their heritage. The findings align with prior research (Huq et al., 2020; Su et al., 2023) that highlights community values as a key motivator for women's entrepreneurial activities. However, our study goes further by showing how cultural identity functions as a driving force that shapes business goals and practices. Informants described a profound sense of pride and responsibility to preserve traditions, blending personal meaning with broader cultural preservation objectives. This aligns with social feminism's recognition of women's unique motivations, rooted in their roles as cultural stewards and community nurturers.

Table 3
A holistic framework of cultural preservation through women entrepreneurship.

Core components	Cultural identity	Cultural integration	Cultural advocacy	Cultural collaboration	Cultural resilience	Cultural sustainability
Cultural identity	–	Provides the foundational purpose, shaping how heritage is embedded in operations.	Drives the desire to share cultural pride, encouraging advocacy efforts.	Inspires collaborative efforts to strengthen cultural values in the community.	Strengthens resilience by creating a strong cultural foundation.	Serves as the primary motivation, aiming to sustain the cultural legacy.
Cultural integration	Embeds identity into actionable practices, ensuring the business reflects cultural values.	–	Creates the basis for advocacy by embedding heritage within the business model.	Collaborates with local artisans and partners to incorporate shared heritage in operations.	Supports resilience by grounding adaptation in traditional practices.	Integration of heritage ensures that cultural practices remain relevant over time.
Cultural advocacy	Encourages identity-sharing with the public, enhancing awareness of cultural heritage.	Promotes integrated practices to a broader audience, ensuring continuity of cultural heritage in public view.	–	Expands reach through partnerships and community-based projects, strengthening impact.	Fosters resilience by raising awareness and building support for heritage preservation.	Advocacy activities aim to ensure the long-term sustainability of cultural practices and knowledge.
Cultural collaboration	Strengthens cultural identity through community involvement, creating a shared sense of heritage.	Enhances integration by pooling resources and fostering more robust and authentic practices.	Broadens advocacy efforts, leveraging community networks to increase awareness.	–	Supports resilience by building a networked approach to overcoming preservation challenges.	Community engagement encourages the sustainability of cultural heritage by establishing a collective commitment.
Cultural resilience	Reinforces the identity by adapting and innovating without losing core cultural values.	Helps maintain traditional practices while adapting them to meet modern needs, balancing heritage with progress.	Advocates for the adaptive value of culture showcasing its relevance in the modern world.	Draws on community support for resilience, helping to overcome challenges together.	–	Resilience is key to ensuring the enduring relevance of cultural heritage and forming a sustainable legacy.

Note: The diagonal cells represent the self-contained roles of each component, while the off-diagonal cells describe the impacts of each component on the others, showing how they collectively work toward achieving cultural sustainability.

The findings of our study went further than the existing literature and demonstrated that cultural elements shape the business models of women entrepreneurs. In particular, *cultural integration* was defined by the intentional incorporation of traditional practices and knowledge into business operations by our informants. Cultural integration illustrates the operationalisation of cultural identity. Social feminism's focus on the integration of social values and economic goals is reflected in how entrepreneurs ensure their ventures authentically represent their heritage. Informants used traditional methods, produced culturally significant goods, and incorporated heritage into branding and customer experiences, reinforcing authenticity and community identity. This finding extends prior research (Xie and Wu, 2025) by demonstrating how cultural integration creates ventures that not only deliver products but also serve as platforms for cultural preservation. Social feminism explains this as a manifestation of women's ability to deal with structural constraints while maintaining cultural authenticity, blending tradition with modern economic practices (Brush et al., 2009; Kennedy, 2008).

In line with the previous research (See Xie and Wu, 2025), the findings of our study showed that, besides the commercially driven entrepreneurial activities, the entrepreneurial activities of women have a cultural sustainability orientation. In the case of our study, *Cultural advocacy*, the effort to educate and promote cultural heritage, emerged as a critical strategy for ensuring cultural sustainability. Social feminism theory highlights the importance of relational and communal goals, which were evident in how entrepreneurs engaged communities and visitors through workshops, events, and collaborations with cultural institutions. These efforts reflect social feminism's perspective that women often prioritise social and cultural impacts over purely economic outcomes (Kennedy, 2008). Informants emphasised the need to raise awareness and pass on traditional crafts and knowledge to younger generations, highlighting the theory's focus on fostering intergenerational continuity and social transformation.

Cultural collaboration (i.e., working with community members, artisans, and cooperatives) was a significant theme that reinforced social feminism's emphasis on collective agency. Informants' collaborative efforts were deeply rooted in shared cultural goals, pooling resources and skills to sustain traditional practices. The collaborative strategies described by the informants, such as forming cooperatives and partnering with NGOs, demonstrate the relational and community-focused aspects of social feminism. These practices highlight how women entrepreneurs work within and against structural constraints to create shared spaces for cultural preservation and collective empowerment (Sharifi-Tehrani et al., 2024). Social feminism recognises that women often rely on informal networks to overcome systemic barriers. These findings illustrate how community collaboration serves as a form of resistance to structural limitations, enabling women to amplify their cultural and entrepreneurial impact.

While prior research (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2023; Kimbu et al., 2020; Seyfi et al., 2025) highlights the role of networks in women entrepreneurship, our study advances this by identifying the culturally oriented goals of these collaborations. Social feminism provides a lens to understand how these networks foster interdependence, shared responsibility, and cultural continuity, demonstrating women's capacity to navigate and leverage community-based support systems.

The findings of our study are also in line with the research by Makandwa et al. (2023) and Seyfi et al. (2025) advocating that women entrepreneurs combine economic objectives with social and environmental missions, resulting in business practices that contribute to cultural resilience and sustainable community development. In our study, *Cultural resilience* encapsulates the strategies women entrepreneurs employ to address challenges, such as balancing modernisation with cultural authenticity and adapting to consumer preferences. Social feminism theory emphasises women's resilience in coping with patriarchal and capitalist structures, which was evident in informants' innovative approaches to preserving cultural practices amidst economic pressures. The tension between tradition and innovation led entrepreneurs to position heritage as a unique selling point, creatively adapting products and practices to remain relevant. This aligns with social feminism's assertion that women's entrepreneurial resilience stems from their ability to blend personal agency with structural adaptation, ensuring that cultural practices thrive in contemporary contexts (Makandwa et al., 2023; Seyfi et al., 2025).

5.2. Integration of framework components

The integration of these components reveals a cohesive framework for how women entrepreneurs preserve cultural heritage (see Fig. 2). At the core of this framework is cultural identity, the foundational element that drives these entrepreneurs to initiate and sustain businesses grounded in heritage. For each entrepreneur, cultural identity represents a deep-seated connection to inherited traditions, personal experiences, and a sense of cultural pride (Su et al., 2023). As the cornerstone of their efforts, cultural identity provides a lens through which these entrepreneurs view their role as cultural custodians, guiding them in making business decisions that honour and uphold their heritage (Brush et al., 2009; Calás et al., 2009). Building upon this foundation, cultural integration emerges as the operational phase where cultural identity is translated into actionable business practices. This component represents the active embodiment of heritage in daily operations, from production techniques to branding and customer interactions. Through cultural integration, entrepreneurs maintain authenticity by embedding traditional methods and culturally significant products into their offerings. For example, using locally sourced materials, following generational recipes, or applying craft techniques passed down through families ensure that cultural values are not merely represented but lived within the business. In this way, cultural integration serves as a bridge between heritage and modern commerce, allowing these entrepreneurs to honour tradition while appealing to contemporary markets.

Cultural advocacy extends this integration by transforming business practices into educational and promotional efforts aimed at raising awareness and appreciation for cultural heritage. Entrepreneurs do not simply preserve culture within their businesses but actively seek to share it with others through workshops, events, and collaborations with cultural institutions. Cultural advocacy empowers these women to become ambassadors of their heritage, educating customers, tourists, and community members about the significance of their traditions. This outreach fosters a broader cultural appreciation, ensuring that traditional knowledge is preserved within the business and disseminated across generations and communities. Further strengthening these efforts, cultural collaboration leverages community involvement to reinforce and sustain heritage preservation on a collective level. By working together, community members strengthen their cultural practices and ensure that the entire community benefits from the preservation efforts. Entrepreneurs engage with local artisans, form cooperatives, and participate in community-driven projects, cultivating a network of shared cultural practice and mutual support. This cooperation strengthens the cultural fabric of the community, enabling these entrepreneurs to tackle preservation collectively, rather than as isolated individuals. Such collaboration demonstrates the relational aspects emphasised by social feminism theory, as collective action amplifies the cultural and social impact of their ventures. A critical component that underpins and sustains these efforts is cultural resilience, which encapsulates the strategies and adaptability required to confront challenges posed by modernisation, economic pressures, and cultural erosion. Entrepreneurs are often tasked with balancing the demands of contemporary markets with the need to stay true to traditional practices. This resilience allows them to navigate these tensions, adopting innovative approaches without compromising cultural integrity. For instance, informants highlighted how they used creativity and innovation in product development, positioning heritage as a unique selling point. This approach ensured that cultural practices remained relevant and valued in

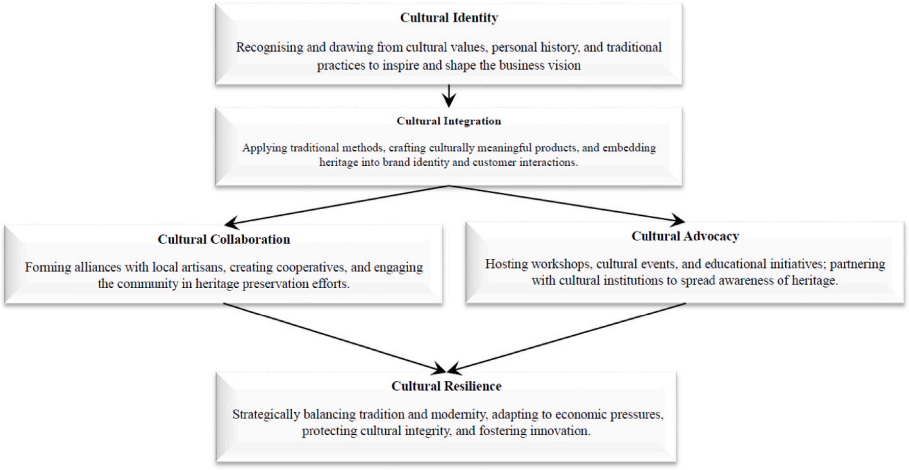


Fig. 2. Integrated framework of cultural preservation through women entrepreneurship.

contemporary contexts. Cultural resilience empowers these entrepreneurs to adapt to shifting societal trends, ensuring that their businesses, and by extension, their heritage, remain relevant and viable amidst external pressures. At the apex of this framework is cultural sustainability, the overarching goal that encapsulates the long-term impact of these efforts on communities and future generations. This component reflects the enduring commitment of women entrepreneurs to preserve their heritage, not only for the present but also for the future. By aligning cultural identity, integration, advocacy, collaboration, and resilience, cultural sustainability ensures that heritage remains a vital and dynamic part of societal development.

5.3. Theoretical contributions

This study offers three distinct theoretical contributions at the intersection of social feminism and cultural entrepreneurship. We argue that women's entrepreneurial practices in tourism, when viewed through the lens of social feminism, constitute a form of gendered cultural labour that challenges dominant economic models and reframes success in terms of care, continuity, and community. In doing so, our study repositions cultural entrepreneurship as a feminist site of theorisation and shifts attention from static identity markers to dynamic processes of negotiation, care, and adaptation. Building on this argument, we advance three theoretical contributions that deepen the analytical scope of social feminism and cultural entrepreneurship by drawing from the empirical findings of this study.

First, we extend social feminism theory by demonstrating how women entrepreneurs use cultural entrepreneurship not only to deal with structural barriers but to reconfigure the meanings and purposes of entrepreneurship itself. Social feminism has historically focused on how gendered inequalities shape access to resources (e.g., Huq et al., 2020; Jennings and Brush, 2013), but our findings show how women also reinterpret entrepreneurial goals, using business as a vehicle for cultural stewardship and collective well-being. In particular, women resist masculinised success metrics by prioritising intergenerational knowledge transfer, cultural identity, and embedded responsibility. These practices represent a feminist ethics of entrepreneurship grounded in cultural care work rather than competitive accumulation. We propose that such reinterpretations constitute a form of situated resistance that broadens social feminism beyond critique and into the domain of creative agency.

Second, we develop and refine five interrelated constructs, cultural identity, cultural integration, cultural advocacy, cultural collaboration, and cultural resilience, as components of a gendered model of cultural entrepreneurship. These are theoretically grounded mechanisms through which women engage in cultural sustainability. Rather than treating them as parallel themes, we position them as mutually reinforcing and often contradictory dimensions of entrepreneurial practice. For example, cultural advocacy and cultural integration frequently require balancing authenticity with adaptation, while cultural resilience involves managing market pressures without diluting heritage. This model makes visible the tensions women face in performing cultural labour under capitalist and patriarchal constraints. In this sense, we offer a new framework that theorises cultural entrepreneurship as a site of feminist negotiation, where care and commerce, tradition and innovation, often coexist in uneasy alignment (Brush et al., 2009; Chasserio et al., 2014). While grounded in the specific context of women tourism entrepreneurs in Cyprus, our framework has broader implications for understanding how feminist theory can illuminate the labour of cultural continuity under conditions of systemic constraint.

Third, our findings emphasise the role of friction, particularly between commercial imperatives and cultural authenticity, as a productive lens for extending social feminism in the tourism domain. We show that women's work is shaped not only by resource scarcity or gendered exclusions, but by the daily negotiation of cultural meaning in commodified contexts. Through hybrid strategies (e.g., adapting rituals for tourism, curating narratives for outsiders, blending artisanal production with market appeal), women do not simply preserve culture; they reinterpret it under conditions of pressure. This moves social feminism beyond structural determinism by showing how agency is enacted through contradiction and improvisation. It also contributes to emerging work in cultural entrepreneurship (e.g., Cruz et al., 2022; Lindvert et al., 2024) by theorising authenticity not as a static value but as a relational practice, shaped through interactions with tourists, community members, and institutions.

5.4. Implications for policy and practice

This study offers several policy and practice implications to address the marginalisation of women cultural entrepreneurs in tourism. Drawing on our findings, seven areas require attention: (1) institutional and financial support, (2) capacity building and digital access, (3) mentorship and knowledge transfer, (4) sustainable and visible practices, (5) cooperative and community models, (6) resilience and legal safeguards, and (7) inclusive policymaking and academic integration. First, women-led cultural tourism ventures require formal recognition and targeted support. Despite their role in sustaining intangible heritage, these businesses remain informal and undervalued (Themes 1, 4, 5). This calls for a shift from gender-neutral to gender-transformative strategies (Huq et al., 2020), including dedicated funding for cultural enterprises and mechanisms to dismantle systemic barriers. Second, capacity-building programmes must address digital literacy,

sustainability, and leadership. Digital tools such as Instagram and LinkedIn enhance visibility but risk exclusion without equitable access. Business success should be evaluated using broader metrics that reflect cultural and social outcomes, not just financial returns. Incubators and entrepreneurship hubs can provide interdisciplinary peer support, while financial institutions should consider dedicated loans for cultural entrepreneurs. Third, structured mentorship programmes are essential. Intergenerational knowledge transfer, highlighted in Theme 2, enables women to adapt tradition into marketable forms while preserving authenticity (Moswete and Lacey, 2023). Gender-responsive training in eco-tourism and market strategy would support such transitions. Fourth, sustainability should be embedded in practice. Using local materials, minimising waste, and promoting eco-conscious tourism not only serve environmental goals but also reflect communal values (Theme 5). Digital storytelling can extend the reach of cultural products, but must be coupled with training and safeguards to prevent exclusion. Fifth, community-based cooperatives offer feminist alternatives to individualised business models. Cooperative initiatives, linked to Themes 1 and 5, promote shared agency and cultural literacy. Local institutions should co-organise cultural events, workshops, and youth programmes to support heritage transmission and embed women's work within tourism packages. Sixth, women's strategies for resilience, from income diversification to affective labour, require policy support. Targeted training in digital marketing, export logistics, and financial management can help strengthen these capacities. Legal protection of cultural products, including intellectual property and traditional knowledge, is also critical.

Seventh, including women entrepreneurs in policymaking is essential. Co-designed policy ensures relevance and empowerment. Promoting women's digital inclusion and visibility challenges dominant narratives and fosters inclusive benchmarks (Theme 1). Aligning policy with the UN Sustainable Development Goals will help embed gender equality and cultural sustainability into tourism systems. Academic institutions also have a role. Embedding cultural entrepreneurship into higher education equips future entrepreneurs to navigate structural constraints. Using contextual frameworks (e.g., Brush et al., 2009) in curriculum and training can help students and practitioners confront institutional barriers while promoting culturally rooted, socially responsive entrepreneurship.

5.5. Limitations and future research directions

This study offers theoretically grounded empirical insights into women's entrepreneurship and cultural preservation in tourism, yet several limitations should be acknowledged, which suggest directions for further research. First, the study focuses on Cyprus, a context with specific historical, cultural, and political characteristics. While this setting provides depth, it may limit transferability. Broader comparative work across different regions, especially between developing and industrialised economies, would help examine how varying socio-economic conditions shape women's entrepreneurial responses to cultural and structural challenges. Second, our focus is on tourism and related cultural sectors. While these are critical for heritage work, women's entrepreneurial contributions in fields such as education, health, or digital services remain underexplored. Future studies should investigate how cultural values are embedded into ventures across less conventional or non-cultural industries to reveal a wider spectrum of strategies.

Third, this study relies on qualitative methods. While this approach offers rich, situated narratives, it cannot provide measurable evidence of broader patterns or causal links. Future research using mixed methods, combining interviews with surveys or impact assessments, would help quantify how cultural entrepreneurship influences economic resilience, social capital, or sustainability outcomes. Fourth, while we examined gendered experiences, we did not fully explore how other identity dimensions, such as ethnicity, class, or disability, shape access to entrepreneurial resources. Future work should examine how these identity factors combine to shape opportunity and constraint. Such studies would better reflect the diversity of women's realities and uncover how overlapping social positions affect entrepreneurial agency and recognition. Fifth, longitudinal studies are needed to understand how women's strategies evolve, particularly in response to external pressures such as tourism trends, policy shifts, or environmental disruptions. Tracking these changes would offer a clearer picture of cultural continuity, adaptation, and business sustainability. Finally, this study works within the framework of social feminism to examine gendered entrepreneurial practices. While this has provided valuable insights, future research should test other theoretical approaches such as institutional theory, social capital, or critical development theory. Comparative theoretical work can further interrogate how structural constraints are reproduced or resisted in various contexts and help explain entrepreneurial behaviour in settings where formal support structures are weak or absent.

6. Conclusion

Our study examined how women entrepreneurs in Cyprus' tourism sector engage in cultural preservation as a form of entrepreneurial agency. Drawing on social feminism theory and qualitative insights, our findings extend existing understandings of women entrepreneurship by positioning cultural stewardship as a core entrepreneurial logic, rather than a peripheral outcome. These reframing challenges dominant economic models focused on growth and profit (see Brush et al., 2009; Calás et al., 2009) and highlight the relational, affective, and intergenerational work that underpins women-led ventures (Chasserio et al., 2014; Huq et al., 2020). While social feminism traditionally focuses on how women adapt to structural constraints, our study shows how they also reconfigure cultural-symbolic systems. Women entrepreneurs act as institutional entrepreneurs, leveraging heritage to challenge gendered exclusions and redefine value beyond market terms, extending social feminism into the domain of cultural agency.

Our research contributes to tourism scholarship by advancing a feminist, place-based model of tourism development (Oliveira et al., 2024). It responds to calls for alternative epistemologies that centre indigenous knowledge, emotional geographies, and community-led narratives, offering a grounded framework for sustainable tourism rooted in care and continuity (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2023; Oliveira et al., 2024). Cultural sustainability is often reduced to a branding tool in tourism discourse. Our findings recast it as a feminist ethic anchored in collective memory, social reproduction, and resistance to commodification (Lindvert et al., 2024; Makandwa et al., 2023). Women's ventures emerge not as passive transmitters of tradition, but as active curators of cultural futures. Therefore, our study repositions women entrepreneurs as cultural innovators and change agents, offering a robust, interdisciplinary contribution to theories of entrepreneurship, gender, and tourism. Future research may build on these insights by examining the connections between cultural entrepreneurship, digital transformation, postcolonial identity, and inclusive policy design.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Levent Altinay: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Emete Toros:** Writing – original draft, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Sanaz Vatankhah:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology. **Siamak Seyfi:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Conceptualization.

Impact statement

Our research highlights the transformative role of women entrepreneurs in preserving and promoting cultural heritage within the tourism

sector of Cyprus. By uncovering how these women integrate traditional practices, advocate for cultural education, and foster community collaboration, our study provides actionable insights for policymakers and stakeholders. The findings inform the development of gender-sensitive microfinance schemes, capacity-building programmes, and policy frameworks that address the unique barriers women entrepreneurs face. In practice, this can enhance the economic resilience of women-led businesses while ensuring the sustainability of local cultural assets. Furthermore, the proposed framework for cultural preservation through entrepreneurship offers a replicable model for regions seeking to balance cultural authenticity with economic growth. By equipping tourism boards, NGOs, and local governments with targeted strategies, the research contributes to strengthening the cultural economy, enriching community identity, and enhancing sustainable tourism practices in culturally rich but economically constrained contexts.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix 1. Topics discussed during the interview

1) Can you tell us about your success story - how did you start? What were the motivations behind this business initiative? (financial, personal achievement, social responsibility to contribute to society/culture)
2) Who else helped you with this initiative? (family, friends, banks, associations), How did you convince them to help you? What were their motivations to help you? (any socio-cultural cause, i.e. taking a collective approach to preserving the heritage?)?
3) How do you leverage both formal and informal networks to advance your business and its cultural objectives? Can you provide examples of how these networks have been beneficial?
4) What skills did you and you have been utilising for your entrepreneurial activities? How do you combine these entrepreneurial skills with your vision for sustaining and preserving the cultural heritage/preserving the culture of this society?
5) Considering your experience, how have gender-specific barriers impacted your entrepreneurial journey, and what strategies have you employed to overcome them?
6) How does it feel to be a woman entrepreneur in this society? How does it feel to be empowered? And how do you use this empowerment?
7) How do you see your role as a woman beyond running a business?
8) Do you feel there is a need to preserve the cultural heritage of this society? How does your business help with preserving the cultural heritage? What advice would you give to the new generation of entrepreneurs?
9) What are the challenges of running a business with a social cause - i.e. preserving the cultural heritage? (Individual versus collective responsibility? How could that be possible?).
10) In what ways does your business incorporate sustainable practices, and how do these practices contribute to both cultural preservation and community development?
11) What role could the government play in supporting businesses of this kind? (incentives, policies, and establishing cooperative organisations to purchase products).
12) What are/could be the main reasons why women's entrepreneurial activities are not properly supported in this country? What could happen if proper support is not offered? How do you feel about the possible consequences
13) How do you define success for a business of this kind, with social/cultural ambition? What are you planning to be more successful
14) What will happen after you retire? Do you have a succession plan?
15) If you were to start up your business again, what would you do differently?
16) What advice would you give someone who would like to start up a business of handcrafting or producing local food/clothes, service sector, etc.

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