

On social media, female entrepreneurs act demurely to thrive

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Brooke Duffy. Credit: Cornell University

The more things change, the more they stay the same for female internet entrepreneurs.

Self-employed [women](#) working in digital creative industries, such as blogging or marketing, feel compelled to conduct [business](#) online in a traditionally feminine way, according to a new Cornell study. This includes maintaining [social media](#) personas that display modesty, sociality and "an aura of decorum" – the same restrictions that often apply to women in off-line business settings.

"I doubt workers – male or female – in traditionally masculine-coded industries such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields experience these same demands," said the study's author, Brooke Duffy, assistant professor of communication and an expert on gender and social media.

"While it's inspiring that we are seeing a rise in female entrepreneurship in the digital age, these business categories tend to be highly feminized. This means that gender hierarchies and inequalities in the world of work endure," she said.

Duffy and co-author Urszula Pruchniewska of Temple University published their study March 3 in *Information, Communication & Society*.

They interviewed 22 self-employed women professionals who work in digital media, including professional blogging, writing, entertainment and marketing. The researchers asked the women how they used social

media to run their businesses and how they understood entrepreneurship and their relationship to it. All the women were active on [social media platforms](#) including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Pinterest.

Often, the entrepreneurs were caught in what the researchers call a "digital double-bind." On one hand, they participated in the traditionally masculine-coded category of entrepreneurship, where figures like Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg and Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos are often upheld as paragons of success; on the other, they were constrained by feminine stereotypes. That resulted in taking on more work and risk than men to ensure the success of their online ventures.

The entrepreneurs felt obligated to use social media to build their brands in an understated way; cultivate intimate relationships with audiences, clients and peer networks; and share their personal lives in a professional context. These strategies adhere to gender roles that cast women as social and emotionally expressive, Duffy said. And they emphasize the social prescription that women should be modest about their achievements, she said.

For example, the entrepreneurs promoted their businesses with a soft sell, rather than an aggressive approach. Many attributed their successes to their ability to "build relationships" and grow their businesses "organically."

"By framing these successes as 'organic' rather than calculated or hard-won, interviewees effectively conceal the time and energy required to participate in networking and marketing activities, rhetorically distancing themselves from overt self-promotion," the authors wrote.

And the business owners felt compelled to constantly interact and maintain social ties with clients and social media followers. Many viewed these social interactions as a prerequisite for success.

But they also highlighted the stress brought on by the urgency of building relationships with their client base on social media – and the difficulty of not going over the top with their interactive intimacy to the point where it would damage their business credibility.

In addition, the entrepreneurs felt obligated to put their private lives on public display to cultivate relationships with clients. As a professional decision, they had to consider whether to post photos and information about their families on their social media accounts, for example. "One interviewee recounted how her website was hacked repeatedly and she began to worry that her personal information could threaten the safety of her family. She explained how 'visibility can be a very dangerous thing for a woman,'" Duffy said.

The authors linked this obligation to act "feminine" on social media to a long history of women's devalued, unpaid labor, from child care and domestic work to the "emotional labor" implicit in the service industries.

"Though our culture valorizes self-enterprise and prods young people that 'We're all entrepreneurs now,' it's important to keep in mind the many ways in which digital [media](#) amplifies – rather than challenges – traditional norms and social hierarchies," Duffy said.

More information: Brooke Erin Duffy et al. Gender and self-enterprise in the social media age: a digital double bind, *Information, Communication & Society* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2017.1291703](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1291703)

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