Social Representations of Women Entrepreneurs in Lithuanian Internet Media

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Abstract: This study examines how Lithuanian internet media construct social representations of women entrepreneurs and whether these representations reinforce or challenge gendered entrepreneurial norms. Guided by Social Representations Theory, the research analyses 24 media texts published between 2019 and 2024, including online news, business publications, and social media, using qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis. The findings reveal ambivalent portrayals: women's competence is recognized, but entrepreneurial success is frequently framed through exceptional, individualized, or stereotypical narratives rather than as a normal economic activity. Leadership is presented as relational, while work–life balance remains a gendered expectation. The study is limited by its qualitative design and relatively small sample of media texts from Lithuania. The findings suggest that media discourse simultaneously increases women's visibility while reinforcing traditional gender norms that constrain entrepreneurial legitimacy.

Keywords: Social representations; women entrepreneurs; media discourse; gender and entrepreneurship; leadership representation.

Introduction

Gender equality is one of the fundamental principles of democracy, social justice, and sustainable economic development. It involves not only equal rights for women and men, but also equal opportunities to participate in social, economic, and political life without discrimination. Although significant progress has been made in many European Union countries, inequality in the labour market, particularly in management and business positions, still persists. Lithuania ranks 7th in Europe in terms of opportunities for women to participate in the labour market, and the number of women in management roles has been increasing in recent years. However, top–level decision–making positions remain more difficult for women to attain, often due to social and cultural factors rather than differences in competence. Women in Lithuania

also face challenges such as gender stereotypes and difficulties balancing professional and personal life, while their achievements in business are sometimes evaluated differently than those of men. Such differences in assessment contribute to the unequal visibility, recognition, and authority of women and men in society. Nevertheless, positive changes are also being recorded in the country. According to a study of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Lithuania scored 5.67 out of 10 on the overall gender equality index (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023). These results show that although progress in gender equality is evident, existing structural barriers still limit women's opportunities to participate fully in top-level leadership and decision-making. In Lithuania, despite relatively favourable conditions for women's participation in the labour market and the growing number of female entrepreneurs, their leadership roles are still often interpreted through gender stereotypes. The media plays a significant role in shaping these perceptions, as it not only reflects social reality but also contributes to constructing dominant ideas about what a "successful" woman in business should look like. Media representations frequently emphasize women's personal characteristics, appearance, or family roles rather than their professional achievements or strategic decisions. Such portrayals reinforce simplified gender roles and frame women's leadership as an exception rather than a norm.

The research aim is to analyse how female entrepreneurs and managers are portrayed in the Lithuanian internet media. By integrating Social Representations Theory with media discourse analysis, this study contributes to gender and entrepreneurship research by demonstrating how media discourse constructs symbolic legitimacy for women entrepreneurs through three recurring representational strategies: exceptionalism, moral entrepreneurship, and relational leadership.

Literature Review

Scientific literature extensively analyses gender differences in the entrepreneurship and leadership, but it is increasingly emphasized that these differences cannot be explained solely by structural factors such as education, work experience, or access to financial resources. Although women's educational attainment is equal to or even higher than that of men in most countries, and their participation in the labour market is steadily increasing, the gender gap in leadership positions and business development remains significant (EIGE, 2023; OECD, 2022). Research shows that gender differences in leadership and entrepreneurship are increasingly linked to cultural factors such as social expectations, gender stereotypes, and different perceptions of the legitimacy of women's and men's activities (Marlow & Martinez, 2018; Jennings & Brush, 2019). Empirical data also confirm that there are no statistically significant differences between women and men in their ability to perform quick tasks and overall leadership effectiveness (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014; Hoobler et al., 2018). However, gender differences are more

common in decision-making styles and behavioural expressions, especially when making strategic decisions and acting in conditions of uncertainty. Female leaders are more likely to demonstrate behaviour that emphasises relationships and cooperation, while men are more likely to emphasise task and action performance (Eagly & Heilman, 2016). It has also been noted that emotional expression and reactions to negative situations may differ according to gender, but these differences are more related to socialisation and organisational norms than to innate abilities (Hyde, 2014).

There are persistent gender differences in leadership, business growth, and innovation. Empirical studies show that women in business and leadership positions are more likely to encounter invisible, symbolic barriers that limit their opportunities to grow, innovate, and be recognized as equal business leaders (Brush et al., 2019). However, researchers emphasize that these differences are not due to a lack of competence or ambition on the part of women. On the contrary, women often operate in an environment where their entrepreneurship is viewed with more scepticism and their decisions are more often questioned. This situation leads not only to objective limitations on their activities, but also to subjective self-assessment, which can influence strategic business decisions.

Overall, the findings suggest that gender differences in entrepreneurship cannot be attributed solely to structural factors such as education or experience, but are strongly influenced by cultural norms, stereotypes, and perceptions of legitimacy. Persistent gender gaps in leadership and business growth are therefore linked to invisible structural and symbolic barriers, created by media rather than differences in ability or ambition.

In contemporary society, the media plays a significant role in shaping social understandings of norms, roles, and stereotypes, often in implicit ways. Many experts point out that the images and stories we see in the media are usually presented as if they are completely objective and obvious truths. However, in reality, they are shaped by social and cultural influences that colour how things are portrayed (Couldry, 2012). When it comes to how entrepreneurs are shown in the media, there is a noticeable gender bias. Men are often depicted as logical, strategic, innovative, and focused on growth. Women entrepreneurs, on the other hand, are frequently portrayed through a different lens—emphasizing their personal qualities, emotionality, appearance, or family roles (Sundermeier, 2024). This portrayal influences how we perceive men and women in the business world, often reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes

Media framing of entrepreneurship significantly shapes public perceptions of gender in business. In Lithuania, media representations of women often highlight achievements only when they are connected to social or lifestyle themes, such as being a “mom-entrepreneur” or adapting a business during the pandemic, whereas business growth strategies or financial success are more frequently associated with male-led companies (Mažonaitė, 2022). These

gendered narratives emphasise personal traits, relationships, and social contexts for women, while men are portrayed in terms of strategic decisions and measurable business outcomes (Marlow & Martinez Dy, 2018; Gill, 2007).

Despite the relatively balanced representation of women and men in Lithuania's overall workforce, a persistent gender gap remains in business management and ownership. To assess whether media representations correspond to the actual gender distribution in business leadership, this study examines Lithuanian labour market statistics (see Fig. 1).

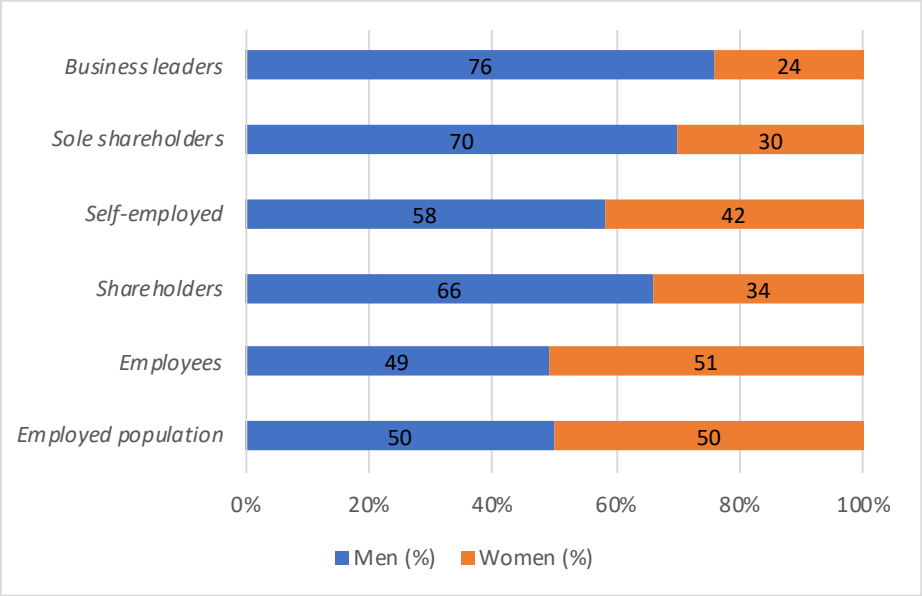


Fig. 1. Statistics on men and women in the Lithuanian labour market, 2024 (source: State Data Agency, 2024. Women and men in Lithuania 2024. State Data Agency. https://osp.stat.gov.lt)

The data presented in Fig. 1 reveals that men constitute the absolute majority in business decision-making positions: they account for about two-thirds of all company owners and as much as 70% of sole shareholders. Meanwhile, women account for less than one-third of these positions, and only 24% of all company managers are women in top-level management positions. The figure also shows that although women are actively involved in the labor market as employees and self-employed workers, their participation decreases as they move up the hierarchy towards strategic decision-making and control functions. In summary, the media representation of entrepreneurship and gender is a socially constructed process shaped by prevailing gender norms, power relations, and media logic.

Social representation theory (SRT) explains how collective meanings and social knowledge are created, shared, and maintained through communication and discourse (Lo Monaco et al., 2017). It highlights how social reality shapes what is perceived as legitimate, normal, or desirable behavior. In entrepreneurship research, SRT enables analysis of how media narratives influence the perception and evaluation of female and male entrepreneurs.

Three key SRT concepts are particularly relevant: anchoring, objectification, and normative boundaries.

Anchoring refers to interpreting unfamiliar phenomena by linking them to existing cultural categories and shared meanings (Lo Monaco et al., 2017; Sammut et al., 2015). In Lithuanian media discourse, women's entrepreneurship is often framed through familiar social roles, such as the "mother-entrepreneur" or crisis-adaptive entrepreneur, positioning women's success as exceptional rather than typical.

Objectification involves transforming abstract phenomena into concrete and recognizable symbols (Lo Monaco et al., 2017). Media representations often objectify women entrepreneurs through personal narratives, photographs, or stereotypical imagery, reinforcing their portrayal as different from the conventional entrepreneur.

Normative boundaries define socially acceptable limits of identity and achievement within a cultural context (Sundermeier, 2024; Lo Monaco et al., 2017). Media narratives frequently construct the "typical entrepreneur" using masculine traits such as rationality, competitiveness, and decisiveness, implicitly positioning women's entrepreneurial success as outside the norm.

Although previous studies have examined gender stereotypes in entrepreneurial discourse (Marlow & Martinez Dy, 2018; Jennings & Brush, 2019), limited research has explored how media narratives shape symbolic legitimacy within entrepreneurial ecosystems. This gap is particularly evident in smaller European economies. This study addresses this issue by analyzing representations of women entrepreneurs in Lithuanian media using social representation theory.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore how women entrepreneurs are portrayed within Lithuanian media discourse, and to understand how these portrayals influence the construction of entrepreneurial legitimacy, leadership, and gender norms. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this investigation, as it enables a nuanced examination of the underlying meanings, symbolic frameworks, and interpretive patterns present in media texts—focusing on their qualitative richness rather than simply quantifying frequencies or establishing causal links. The empirical foundation of this research comprises 24 media texts sourced from Lithuanian online platforms. These include articles from prominent national news portals, specialized business media outlets, and selected social media pages that blend lifestyle and business content. Collectively, these sources represent the dominant narratives through which women entrepreneurs are made visible to the wider public. The selection

process was guided by purposeful sampling, aligned with the specific goals of the study. Texts were included if they:

1. explicitly focused on women entrepreneurs, founders, or business leaders;
2. discussed entrepreneurship, leadership, innovation, or business development as a central theme;
3. were published by widely accessible and influential Lithuanian media outlets; and
4. contained narrative or descriptive elements allowing for qualitative interpretation (e.g., interviews, personal accounts, reflective commentary).

The timeframe of the data spans 2019–2024, a period marked by heightened public attention to women's entrepreneurship, sustainability, innovation ecosystems, and leadership visibility in Lithuania. This timeframe enables the analysis to capture contemporary discursive patterns, while remaining sufficiently delimited to allow for close reading and contextual interpretation. The final data represents diverse entrepreneurial fields, including technology startups, education, sustainability-oriented ventures, creative industries, and business networks. This diversity supports comparative interpretation across sectors while maintaining a coherent analytical focus on gendered representations of entrepreneurship. The analysis combines Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine both thematic structures and the deeper symbolic meanings of media representations. This approach enables the identification of dominant themes while also addressing power relations, normative assumptions, and gendered discursive practices.

First, qualitative content analysis was conducted using an iterative coding process. A word cloud was used to visualize the most frequent concepts in the analysed media texts (see Fig. 2). The size of each word reflects its frequency, highlighting key themes such as business, women, growth, leadership, networks, innovation, and community. These terms represent the main narratives through which women's entrepreneurship and leadership are portrayed in Lithuanian media discourse.



Fig 2. Word cloud of dominant concepts in Lithuanian media narratives about women entrepreneurs (source: created by the authors using WordCloud)

An initial coding framework was developed deductively, based on the research questions and existing literature on gender and entrepreneurship. Core analytical categories included:

- leadership competence,
- innovation,
- work–life balance,
- emotionality,
- entrepreneurial legitimacy.

The coding process involved two stages. First, open coding identified recurring themes related to leadership, innovation, emotionality, work–life balance, and legitimacy. Second, axial coding grouped these themes into broader symbolic frames. Coding was conducted at the level of meaningful text segments, with attention to both the topics discussed and their framing.

Second, critical discourse analysis was applied to examine how language and narrative structures construct gendered entrepreneurial identities. Following CDA principles (Fairclough, 2020; Wodak & Meyer, 2019), the analysis focused on:

1. symbolic frames such as exceptionalism, moral entrepreneurship, relational leadership, and resilience;
2. implicit norms related to gender, leadership, and success;
3. legitimizing and delegitimizing discursive strategies.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis. The researcher reflected on interpretative choices and potential biases, documenting insights through analytical memos to ensure transparency.

The study relies exclusively on publicly available media texts and does not involve direct interaction with human participants. Therefore, formal ethical

approval was not required. Nevertheless, ethical principles guided the analysis, and quotations were used solely for analytical purposes. The focus remained on discursive patterns rather than individual evaluations.

Results

The analysis shows that women entrepreneurs are highly visible in Lithuanian media; however, this visibility is selective and narratively framed. Women most frequently appear in interviews, feature stories, inspirational profiles, and award-related coverage rather than in routine economic reporting. As a result, entrepreneurship is often presented through personal stories rather than through structural discussions of business ecosystems. Across the corpus, five dominant themes emerged: leadership competence, innovation, entrepreneurial legitimacy, work–life balance, and emotionality (see Table 1).

Table 1. Dominant Themes in Media Representations of Women Entrepreneurs

Theme	What the theme *does* in the text (QCA interpretation)	Typical linguistic markers / examples
Leadership competence	Competence is often framed as process competence (organising, implementing, maintaining balance) and relational competence (communicating vision, enabling others), rather than "strategic authority" as an abstract leadership ideal.	"clear communication of what the organisation wants" and the leader as implementer; leadership competence equated with prioritising and balancing.
Innovation	Innovation is presented in two ways: (1) technical/product innovation (energy software, growth metrics) and (2) social/educational innovation (sustainability academy, skills building). Innovation is frequently anchored to purpose ("impact", "climate").	"AI/tech/renewables" + growth language; sustainability education framed as "first", "holistic", "community building".
Work–life balance	Balance is strongly gendered: women's leadership is repeatedly narrated through family roles and "how she manages", implying a moral benchmark. Balance becomes a competence in itself.	"4 children… how we managed"; "balancing business and being a mother/wife" framed as leadership competence.
Emotionality	Emotionality is legitimate and visible: portrayed as community affect (belonging, support, hugs, smiles) and as inner feeling (meaning, satisfaction). Emotional register often "softens" entrepreneurship discourse.	"emotions priceless… smiles, hugs"; "different feeling inside" tied to impact/purpose.
Entrepreneurial legitimacy	Legitimacy is built via: (a) awards/recognition (grants, rankings), (b) moral legitimacy ("doing good", "impact"), and (c) compliance/structural struggle (bureaucracy, regulation). Women's legitimacy is sometimes achieved through exceptionalism ("first", "rare").	"won a stipend"; "Financial Times ranking"; "bureaucratic obstacle course"; "no comparable examples—built it ourselves".

Leadership (see Table 1) is predominantly framed as relational and process-oriented, emphasizing communication, coordination, and enabling others rather than strategic authority. Innovation appears through two complementary frames: technological innovation (e.g., AI, renewable energy, software solutions) and social innovation (e.g., sustainability education and community development). Entrepreneurial legitimacy is constructed through awards, rankings, grants, and evidence of social impact, while work–life balance and emotionality remain strongly gendered dimensions of representation. Women entrepreneurs are most visible during symbolically significant moments, such as awards, investment milestones, anniversaries, or success stories. Although these narratives increase recognition, they also position women as exceptional examples rather than as ordinary participants in economic life.

Critical discourse analysis identified five dominant symbolic frames shaping media representations (Table 2): exceptional woman, purpose-driven entrepreneur, community-oriented entrepreneur, resilient entrepreneur, and work–family balancing leader.

Table 2. Dominant Symbolic Frames of Women's Entrepreneurship

Symbolic Frame	Key Characteristics	Discursive Function
Exceptional entrepreneur	First, unique, pioneer	Legitimizes success but reinforces rarity
Purpose-driven entrepreneur	Sustainability, education, impact	Creates moral legitimacy
Community-oriented entrepreneur	Mentorship, support networks	Builds legitimacy through belonging
Resilient entrepreneur	Overcoming obstacles and uncertainty	Success justified through perseverance
Work–family balancing leader	Professional and family responsibilities	Reinforces gendered expectations

The most prominent frame is that of the exceptional entrepreneur, where women are portrayed as pioneers, innovators, or "first movers." Such narratives strengthen legitimacy but simultaneously reinforce the perception that women's entrepreneurial success is unusual rather than normalized. Similarly, purpose-driven entrepreneurship links business activity to sustainability, education, and social impact, creating moral legitimacy beyond financial performance.

A second recurring frame emphasizes relationships, mentoring, and community building. Entrepreneurial success is frequently associated with belonging, collaboration, and mutual support rather than with individual competition. At the same time, narratives of resilience portray success as the outcome of overcoming adversity, bureaucratic barriers, and organisational challenges. These stories legitimize entrepreneurial achievement through endurance and perseverance.

Further findings reveal that women's entrepreneurship is interpreted through gendered narrative logics (Table 3). Leadership competence is commonly represented as enabling, coordinating, and implementing rather than as visionary or authoritative leadership. Although women are recognized as capable leaders, the archetype of the strategic entrepreneur often remains implicitly masculinized.

Similarly, innovation is represented differently depending on context. In technology-oriented ventures, legitimacy is frequently reinforced through external validation such as rankings, investments, and international recognition. In contrast, sustainability and educational initiatives are framed through purpose, care, and social contribution. This distinction reproduces a subtle divide between a masculinized "hard innovation" discourse and a feminized "impact innovation" discourse.

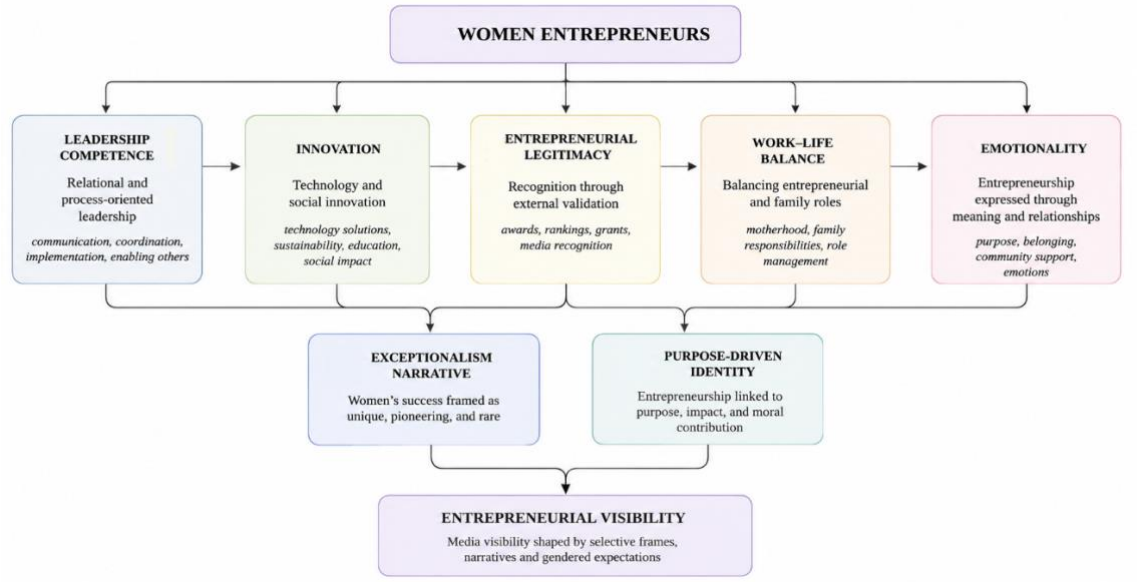


Fig. 3. Gendered Narratives in Entrepreneurial Discourse (created by the authors)

A central finding concerns the prevalence of exceptionalist success narratives. Women entrepreneurs are frequently portrayed as resilient individuals who overcome obstacles through determination, courage, and personal commitment. While these narratives celebrate achievement, they simultaneously obscure structural factors such as access to resources, institutional support, or market conditions. Consequently, entrepreneurial success is individualized and personalized rather than contextualized within broader economic structures.

In summary, findings suggest that women entrepreneurs are increasingly visible and positively represented in media discourse. However, their visibility remains mediated by gendered frames emphasizing exceptionalism, moral legitimacy, relationality, and work–family balance. As a result, women's

entrepreneurial achievements are often recognized through narrative distinction rather than normalized as a routine part of entrepreneurial activity.

Discussion

The findings support previous research showing that media representations of women entrepreneurs remain gendered despite increasing female participation in entrepreneurship (Marlow & Martinez Dy, 2018; Jennings & Brush, 2019). Similar to earlier studies, Lithuanian media emphasize women's personal characteristics, resilience, family responsibilities, and social contribution rather than presenting them as ordinary economic actors. This confirms that entrepreneurial legitimacy continues to be constructed through symbolic rather than purely economic criteria.

From the perspective of Social Representations Theory, media narratives anchor women entrepreneurs to familiar cultural identities, including the caring leader, the resilient pioneer, and the purpose-driven entrepreneur. While these representations increase public visibility, they also reproduce normative expectations that distinguish women from the implicit masculine entrepreneurial prototype.

The Lithuanian context illustrates this paradox particularly well. Although women actively participate in the labour market and entrepreneurship, they remain underrepresented among business owners and top executives. Consequently, media visibility alone does not normalize women's entrepreneurial leadership but may instead reinforce exceptionalist narratives.

These findings contribute to entrepreneurship and media studies by demonstrating how symbolic legitimacy is constructed through discourse. They also suggest that future media communication should increasingly portray women entrepreneurs as routine economic actors rather than exceptional success stories.

Conclusions

This study examined how women entrepreneurs are represented in Lithuanian online media and how these representations shape perceptions of entrepreneurship, leadership, and gender. Drawing on social representations theory and combining qualitative content analysis with critical discourse analysis, the research analysed 24 media texts published between 2019 and 2024. The findings reveal a pattern of ambivalent recognition: women entrepreneurs are visible and their achievements are acknowledged, yet their legitimacy is often framed through narratives that distinguish them from the implicit entrepreneurial norm.

The analysis shows that women entrepreneurs appear regularly in Lithuanian media, but their visibility is selective and narratively structured. They are most often presented in personal profiles, inspirational interviews, or celebratory coverage rather than in routine economic reporting. This positioning frames women entrepreneurs primarily as subjects of personal stories rather than as ordinary actors within economic systems. Consequently, their activities are frequently portrayed as illustrative examples of success rather than normalized forms of economic participation.

The findings also highlight the prevalence of exceptionalist success narratives. Media texts frequently describe women entrepreneurs as pioneers or extraordinary individuals who succeed through resilience, determination, and personal courage. While such narratives validate women's achievements, they simultaneously reinforce the perception that women's success is unusual. From the perspective of social representations theory, exceptionalism enables recognition of women's accomplishments while maintaining the implicit association between entrepreneurship and masculine leadership.

Women's entrepreneurial legitimacy is also often constructed through moral and relational frames. Media narratives link women entrepreneurs to purpose-driven initiatives such as sustainability, education, and social impact, while their leadership is described through collaboration, mentoring, and community building. These representations broaden the meaning of entrepreneurship by highlighting responsibility and social contribution. However, they may also reinforce a gendered distinction between a masculinized entrepreneurial ideal associated with competition and scale and a feminized model linked to care and relational leadership. Media narratives frequently emphasize work–life balance, portraying women entrepreneurs as balancing business leadership with family responsibilities. Although such stories humanize entrepreneurial work, they introduce expectations rarely applied to male entrepreneurs.

Overall, Lithuanian media discourse simultaneously recognizes and constrains women entrepreneurs. While women are celebrated as innovators and changemakers, their success is often framed through exceptional or relational narratives rather than normalized as a standard entrepreneurial role. These findings suggest that increasing media visibility alone may not transform dominant entrepreneurial norms, as media representations can simultaneously enhance recognition and reproduce symbolic gender inequalities.

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Author Contribution

Conceptualization, M.E. Černikovaitė and D. Lunienė; methodology, M.E. Černikovaitė; formal analysis, M.E. Černikovaitė; investigation, M.E. Černikovaitė and D. Lunienė; writing—original draft preparation, M.E. Černikovaitė; writing—review and editing, M.E. Černikovaitė and D. Lunienė. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Tools of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence tools were used solely to improve language clarity and grammar during manuscript preparation. All conceptual development, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and final editorial decisions were performed by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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