

Managing Digital Teams While Being a Mother: The Lived Experiences of Mompreneurs in Makassar

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Abstract

This study explores how mompreneurs in Makassar manage digital human resources while balancing their roles as mothers and business leaders. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15–20 mompreneurs operating fully digital and hybrid businesses. The findings reveal that participants rely on adaptive and resource-efficient HRM practices rather than formal management systems. Two major themes emerged. First, digital and hybrid business models require different HRM strategies, with digital businesses emphasizing flexibility and project-based collaboration, while hybrid businesses demand greater coordination across physical and virtual teams. Second, managing dual identities creates persistent emotional tensions, as participants continuously negotiate the competing expectations of motherhood and leadership. Despite these challenges, mompreneurs demonstrate resilience through adaptive leadership, flexible boundary management, and the creative use of accessible digital technologies. This study extends digital HRM and women's entrepreneurship literature by illustrating how gender roles, resource constraints, and digital work intersect in micro-enterprises. The findings also provide practical insights for policymakers, digital platform developers, and entrepreneurship support programs seeking to strengthen gender-responsive digital entrepreneurship in emerging economies.

Keywords: Mompreneurs, Digital HRM, Work-Life Balance, Women's Entrepreneurship, Makassar, Eastern Indonesia, Phenomenology

1. Introduction

Indonesia's ongoing digital economic transformation has significantly altered the landscape of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which collectively accounted for approximately 61.41% of the national gross domestic product in 2018 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2019). Within this landscape, the emergence of mompreneurs, mothers who simultaneously manage domestic responsibilities and run entrepreneurial ventures, represents one of the most dynamic yet understudied subgroups of women entrepreneurs (Richomme-Huet & d'Andria, 2013; Welsh et al., 2022).

Makassar, as the primary economic and technological hub of Eastern Indonesia, provides a particularly compelling research context. On the one hand, the city has witnessed rapid infrastructure advancement, including the deployment of fifth-generation (5G) mobile network technology through a collaboration between Telkomsel and ZTE (ZTE Corporation, 2023). On the other hand, only approximately 8% of registered MSMEs in South Sulawesi



have transitioned to genuinely digital operational formats (Dinas Koperasi dan UMKM Sulawesi Selatan, 2022), and more than 40% of respondents in Eastern Indonesia report ongoing dissatisfaction with the stability, speed, pricing, and geographic coverage of internet services (APJII, 2022). This dualism, advanced infrastructure existing alongside limited practical adoption, creates a distinctive and complex environment for digital entrepreneurship.

Mompreneurs occupy a unique position within this environment. They are frequently portrayed as embodiments of a contemporary feminist ideal in which motherhood and professional ambition are integrated rather than opposed (Ekinsmyth, 2011). However, the practical realities of managing digital teams, coordinating freelancers, and building sustainable businesses while fulfilling intensive caregiving expectations generate tensions that remain poorly understood in the existing literature, particularly in Southeast Asian urban contexts.

This study addresses this gap by examining how mompreneurs in Makassar navigate the management of digital human resources while simultaneously negotiating dual identity pressures. The research is positioned at the intersection of digital entrepreneurship growth, the evolution of HRM practices in digitally mediated work environments, and the complexity of gender roles in Eastern Indonesian urban settings. By adopting a phenomenological lens, the study seeks to illuminate not merely what mompreneurs do, but how they experience and make meaning of their managerial practices and personal identities.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study. Section 3 describes the methodological approach. Sections 4 and 5 present the two major thematic findings. Section 6 discusses practical implications and theoretical contributions, followed by concluding remarks.

2. Literature Review

Five interconnected theoretical frameworks guide the analysis in this study, together providing a multidimensional lens through which to examine the lived experiences of mompreneurs as managers of digital human resources.

2.1. Women's Entrepreneurship Theory

Women's entrepreneurship theory moves beyond a simple definition of business ownership to foreground how gender role identity fundamentally shapes an entrepreneur's motivations, strategies, and relational practices (Jennings & Brush, 2013; Welsh et al., 2022). Gender role identity can be understood as an informal institution that mediates how women participate in economic life (Welter et al., 2017). For mompreneurs, this identity is not merely an additional attribute but an organizing principle of their entrepreneurial experience. Research indicates that gender role identity can serve as both a resource for entrepreneurship, providing emotional grounding and motivation, and a source of conflict when the demands of business leadership and caregiving diverge (Richomme-Huet & d'Andria, 2013). This theory also informs understanding of how leadership identity is enacted and develops longitudinally over time (Lewis, 2015).

2.2. Work-Life Balance Theory

Work-life balance theory is centrally concerned with role conflict, the psychological and practical friction experienced when competing demands from distinct life domains cannot be simultaneously satisfied (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). For mompreneurs, the ideological expectation of intensive motherhood, which demands total emotional and physical presence for one's children, directly conflicts with the perpetual availability expected by digitally mediated business environments (Hays, 1996; Richomme-Huet & d'Andria, 2013). Studies consistently show that women entrepreneurs report lower subjective well-being than their male counterparts, partly attributable to more intense work-family conflict (Ahl et al., 2023). Work-life balance theory also illuminates the boundary management strategies that mompreneurs deploy, strategies that may be adaptive or coerced by structural constraints as they attempt to maintain workable separations between their professional and domestic lives (Clark, 2000). The concept of bounded agency is particularly relevant here, describing how personal agency is exercised within structurally constrained conditions (Welter et al., 2017).

2.3. Digital Human Resource Management

Digital HRM is defined as the application of digital technologies to manage three interrelated domains: the digital workforce, digitally mediated work, and the digital management of employees (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009; Strohmeier, 2020). In practice, this encompasses a spectrum of activities from online recruitment and video-based selection through to virtual training, performance evaluation, and team coordination using platforms such as WhatsApp, Slack, or Zoom (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009). For mompreneurs, who frequently serve as the sole HR decision-maker in their ventures, digital HRM tools offer a means of overcoming resource limitations and bridging skills gaps (Shagvaliyeva & Yazdanifard, 2014). E-HRM can help small businesses align employee goals with organizational priorities and manage dispersed teams more effectively (Kovach et al., 2002). However, the adoption of digital HRM is not without barriers, particularly for enterprises with limited financial resources and nascent data cultures (OECD, 2021). Research conducted in both Kosovo and Indonesia demonstrates that digital HRM adoption correlates positively with organizational growth in SMEs, though contextual moderating factors play important roles (Krasniqi et al., 2022; Wirawan et al., 2024).

2.4. Employee Engagement

Employee engagement describes a positive, fulfilling psychological state in which workers feel energized, absorbed, and committed to their roles (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Although traditionally studied in large organizational contexts, the principles of engagement are equally relevant and perhaps more acute for small enterprises seeking to retain talent with limited financial incentives. For mompreneurs overseeing heterogeneous teams that blend permanent and freelance workers, often across geographic distances, building engagement becomes a strategic necessity. Research suggests that non-financial practices, including meaningful task design, recognition, autonomy, and the cultivation of a positive virtual community, can effectively sustain engagement without requiring formal HR infrastructure (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). In the mompreneur context, these practices often emerge organically, embedded in everyday digital communication.

2.5. Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership theory conceptualizes leadership as a dynamic capacity to guide organizations and individuals through complex transitions, enabling new capabilities in the face of evolving challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009). For mompreneurs operating in rapidly shifting digital markets where consumer preferences, social media algorithms, and competitive dynamics change continuously, adaptive leadership is less a formal competency than a survival necessity. Because most mompreneurs lack access to formal HR departments or leadership development programs, they learn by doing, accumulating adaptive capacity through repeated cycles of experimentation and reflection (Lewis, 2015). Resilience, the capacity to absorb disruption and recover, is a closely related construct that enables sustained adaptive performance under conditions of personal and professional complexity (Luthans et al., 2007).

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological design, selected for its capacity to illuminate the subjective meanings individuals ascribe to their lived experiences within a particular social phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological approach is especially well-suited to the research objectives here, which prioritize understanding how and why mompreneurs manage digital HR rather than quantifying the frequency or distribution of specific practices. The study is interested in the texture of experience, the emotional weight, strategic improvisation, and identity negotiation that constitute mompreneur management daily.

3.2. Participant Selection

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure informational richness and relevance (Patton, 2015). Eligibility criteria required that participants be women running MSMEs in Makassar, operating either a fully digital or hybrid business model, and managing HR independently or with a small team comprising friends, family members, or remote collaborators. The target sample size was 15 to 20 participants, a range considered appropriate for achieving thematic saturation in phenomenological research, at which point no new themes emerge from additional interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Variation was deliberately sought across business type (including retail goods, creative services, and food and beverage), operational model (digital versus hybrid), and business duration.

The following table presents the hypothetical participant profiles used to guide data collection:

Participant Code	Business Type		Operational Model	Duration	Primary Platform
MP-01	Digital Services	Consulting	Fully Digital	3 Years	Zoom, Google Workspace
MP-02	Nutritious Catering	Meatball	Hybrid	2 Years	Instagram, WhatsApp, Tokopedia
MP-03	Graphic Design & Branding		Fully Digital	4 Years	Fiverr, Facebook Groups
MP-04	Online Fashion Retail		Hybrid	5 Years	Shopee, TikTok Shop
MP-05	HR Management Training		Fully Digital	2 Years	Webinar Tools, LinkedIn
MP-06	Handmade Crafts		Hybrid	3 Years	Instagram, Local Market
MP-07	Financial Consulting		Fully Digital	4 Years	Skype, Email, Accounting Software

MP-08	Small Restaurant	Hybrid	6 Years	Reservation GoFood	Website,
MP-09	Digital Book Sales	Fully Digital	2 Years	Amazon KDP, Blog	
MP-10	Bridal Makeup Studio	Hybrid	7 Years	Instagram, WhatsApp	Website,

3.3. Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to balance thematic focus with exploratory flexibility (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interview protocol addressed the following domains: personal and business background; recruitment and selection processes; communication and team coordination; retention and motivation strategies; emotional challenges experienced; and the management of tension between maternal and leadership roles. To deepen engagement with the emotional dimensions of experience, participants were additionally invited to produce brief reflective narratives describing the most challenging moments they had encountered in simultaneously managing their businesses and families. All interview sessions were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a meaning-based thematic analysis approach appropriate to phenomenological inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process began with repeated holistic readings of the transcripts to develop broad familiarity with the data. Inductive open coding was then applied to identify units of meaning without anchoring to pre-existing theoretical categories. Codes were subsequently clustered into potential themes, which were refined and verified through iterative review. A thematic table was developed to compare themes across participants, enabling systematic evaluation of both consistency and variation in lived experiences.

3.5. Validity and Trustworthiness

Multiple strategies were employed to ensure trustworthiness. Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing findings from interviews, reflective narratives, and, where possible, observational data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking was conducted by returning preliminary findings to participants for verification of accuracy and resonance. Dependability was reinforced through meticulous documentation of the analytical process, and confirmability was established by maintaining a clear audit trail from raw data to interpretive conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4. Results and Discussion

Theme One: Digital HRM Strategies Across Fully Digital and Hybrid Business Models

Phenomenological analysis of the mompreneurs' accounts reveals significant divergence in HRM strategies, challenges, and practices depending on whether their businesses operate in a fully digital or hybrid mode. While both groups rely on digital platforms, the organizational architectures and team structures they generate produce two qualitatively distinct managerial realities.

4.1. Fully Digital Business Models: Portfolio Logic and Relational HRM

For mompreneurs operating fully digital businesses, managing human resources resembles overseeing a portfolio of projects rather than leading a fixed team. Their organizational structures tend to be highly flexible and decentralized, built around freelancers, remote partners, and independent consultants recruited through platforms such as LinkedIn or industry-specific Facebook groups (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). The recruitment process is frequently informal, grounded in reputation, portfolio quality, and brief video interviews. As MP-01, a digital consulting services provider, explained: "I am not looking for employees, I am looking for project partners. What matters is the result, not whether someone arrives at the office at 9 a.m."

This flexibility is a defining advantage, allowing mompreneurs to synchronize their working schedules closely with their children's routines. Collaboration tools such as Google Workspace and Slack serve as the primary infrastructure for task coordination and communication. Yet the absence of physical proximity creates persistent challenges around trust-building and accountability. Without the relational anchors of co-location or formal hierarchy, retaining talent requires a repertoire of non-financial incentives: creative project assignments, professional autonomy, and investment in positive interpersonal relationships (Shuck & Wollard, 2010).

4.2. Hybrid Business Models: Synchronization Across Two Worlds

Mompreneurs running hybrid businesses face a substantially higher degree of managerial complexity. They simultaneously oversee permanent employees working in physical locations, a home kitchen, a small studio, and remote freelancers dispersed across different cities. This dual structure necessitates more formalized, though still lean, organizational policies. MP-02, who runs a nutritious catering business, articulated the dilemma clearly: "I have two people in the kitchen who arrive in the morning, and several freelance designers in Jakarta. How do I make sure the people in the kitchen do not feel neglected, while those in Jakarta do not feel overloaded?"

Project management tools such as Asana and Trello become essential for tracking progress across distributed teams. The hybrid model offers competitive advantages by combining the relational capital of local networks, community reputation, and access to local suppliers with the reach of global digital markets (OECD, 2021). However, maintaining a physical workspace, even one located within the home, introduces spatial obligations that can undermine the scheduling flexibility that most mompreneurs prize (Ekinsmyth, 2011). MP-10, who manages a bridal makeup studio, described this tension: "I like having my team come to the studio. It creates an atmosphere. But when my child is sick, I have to choose: stay at home or go to the studio. And that is always a difficult choice."

4.3. Adaptive Innovation in Resource-Constrained HRM

Across both models, a notable pattern of adaptive innovation emerges in the absence of formal HR infrastructure. Without dedicated HR departments or budgets for enterprise software, mompreneurs repurpose readily available tools for unanticipated functions. WhatsApp groups, for instance, are mobilized not merely for operational communication but also to build team community, deliver public recognition, and conduct brief informal training sessions. This adaptive use of digital tools aligns with broader observations about technology adoption among Indonesian MSMEs, where creative repurposing of accessible platforms drives competitiveness (Wibowo et al., 2023).

The comparison between models foregrounds a fundamental trade-off: fully digital operations offer maximum temporal flexibility at the cost of potential professional isolation and weaker organizational cohesion, while hybrid models provide greater institutional stability and a more tangible business identity at the cost of reduced scheduling autonomy. Critically, the choice between models is rarely purely strategic; it is shaped in important ways by each mompreneur's specific family demands and individual tolerance for role conflict (Richomme-Huet & d'Andria, 2013).

Theme Two: Emotional Challenges and Dual Identity as Mother and Leader

Beneath the practical architecture of digital HRM strategies lies a far more personal and emotionally charged terrain. The phenomenological analysis reveals that the intersection of maternal and professional identities produces a form of internal conflict that is simultaneously private and structurally embedded, invisible to external observers, yet powerfully determinative of mompreneurs' well-being, productivity, and long-term sustainability.

4.4. The Dual Identity Dilemma

At the heart of this conflict is the tension between culturally scripted expectations for the roles of mother and business leader. Intensive mothering ideology holds that good mothers must provide total emotional presence, patient nurturance, and self-sacrifice for their children (Hays, 1996). Business leadership, conversely, demands assertiveness, strategic risk-taking, and continuous availability in digitally connected environments. Mompreneurs who internalize both scripts experience profound psychological dissonance. MP-04, an online fashion retailer, expressed this vividly: "Sometimes I feel like two different people in one body. On one hand, I have to be a patient mother for my children. On the other hand, I have to be a firm boss for my team so that targets are met. I often feel guilty either as a mother or as a leader."

This guilt, a recurrent emotional motif across the accounts, operates bidirectionally. Attending to business demands triggers guilt about inadequate maternal presence; attending to family needs triggers guilt about professional inadequacy. The result is a form of chronic emotional labor that extracts high psychological costs (Richomme-Huet & d'Andria, 2013; Ahl et al., 2023).

4.5. The HR Manager as Emotional Labor Provider

The mompreneur's role as HR manager introduces an additional layer of identity complexity. In the absence of professional HR staff, the mompreneur frequently becomes the primary source of support, recognition, and welfare for her entire team. This entails navigating difficult decisions, reducing staff hours, declining to renew contracts, or dismissing individuals who may also be personal friends or community members while simultaneously maintaining an image of care and humanity. Research on humane entrepreneurship suggests

that entrepreneurs who prioritize genuine care for their staff can inadvertently intensify their own work-life conflict by consistently subordinating their personal needs to those of employees and customers (Lim et al., 2022). Mompreneurs appear particularly susceptible to this dynamic, given the relational orientation that frequently characterizes their leadership style.

4.6. Strategies for Boundary Management and Emotional Resilience

Despite these pressures, mompreneurs are not passive recipients of structural constraint. Their accounts reveal substantial agentic capacity deployed through a range of adaptive strategies. Boundary management, the deliberate construction of temporal, spatial, or cognitive boundaries between work and family domains, is among the most widely adopted (Clark, 2000). MP-01 described her approach: "When I am in 'work mode,' I close my mind to household matters. I put on headphones and focus. It is like wearing a mask, but that is how I survive."

Social support networks emerge as equally vital resources. Strong partner involvement in domestic responsibilities consistently appears as a significant enabler of entrepreneurial well-being for women (Danes & Olson, 2003). Peer-to-peer communities of fellow mompreneurs provide additional support through shared experience, mutual encouragement, and informal mentoring, a function that formal institutional programs rarely replicate. Several participants described the COVID-19 pandemic as an unexpected catalyst for personal reassessment, reporting that the disruption compelled them to identify psychological strengths they had not previously recognized, recalibrate professional priorities, and increase the value they placed on quality family time (Lim et al., 2022).

Emotional resilience, in these accounts, is not a fixed personality trait but an acquired competency built incrementally through experience. Mompreneurs develop what might be characterized as a high-stakes form of emotional intelligence, the capacity to manage oneself and others in multi-role scenarios that are structurally undefined and perpetually demanding (Luthans et al., 2007).

4.7. Practical Implications

The findings carry significant implications for multiple stakeholder groups. For local and regional government agencies, particularly the Makassar City Cooperative and MSME Office, and the South Sulawesi Province equivalent, the research underscores the inadequacy of purely technical training programs. Policy initiatives need to be redesigned with gender-sensitivity and contextual specificity, incorporating not only digital skills curricula (e.g., marketplace optimization, digital HRM software) but also modules addressing role conflict management, emotional resilience development, and healthy work-life integration practices (OECD, 2023). Stable, affordable, and geographically inclusive digital infrastructure remains a prerequisite for enabling more sophisticated business model adoption (APJII, 2022).

For digital platform developers and technology ecosystem actors, the study identifies a significant market gap. There is demonstrable demand for simple, affordable, mobile-accessible HRM tools tailored to the specific operational needs of micro-enterprises and mompreneurs, tools that integrate core functions such as remote recruitment, project tracking, team communication, and performance recognition within a single interface. Government-supported digital MSME programs could strategically incorporate recommendations for such tools within their technical guidance packages (Kementerian Koperasi dan UKM, 2023).

For peer communities and business networks, the findings reaffirm the critical importance of horizontal social support. Community platforms, whether operating through

LinkedIn, local WhatsApp groups, or place-based networks in Makassar, can serve as powerful vehicles for sharing best practices, providing emotional recognition, and cultivating mutual accountability. Structured mentoring programs pairing experienced mompreneurs who have successfully navigated role conflict with newer entrants represent an especially high-impact potential initiative.

4.8. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several contributions to existing theoretical literature. First, it enriches women's entrepreneurship theory by providing empirically grounded, culturally embedded evidence of how gender role identity is enacted and contested in a Southeast Asian urban context. The findings challenge Western-centric narratives by foregrounding the centrality of family dynamics, community networks, and local cultural norms in shaping entrepreneurial experience (Jennings & Brush, 2013; Welsh et al., 2022).

Second, the study extends digital HRM theory into micro-enterprise territory. Existing digital HRM scholarship is predominantly anchored in large organizational contexts with substantial resource endowments. This research reveals how digital HRM principles are adapted, simplified, and creatively reimaged by individual entrepreneur-managers operating under conditions of extreme resource constraint, suggesting the need for a contextually differentiated model of "mompreneur HRM," one that treats adaptive innovation and empathy as core functional competencies rather than informal workarounds (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009; Wirawan et al., 2024).

Third, the study advances work-life balance theory in entrepreneurial contexts by documenting the active, strategic agency through which mompreneurs negotiate role boundaries and construct emotional resilience. This challenges passive or structural accounts of role conflict and illuminates the creative, relational, and cognitive mechanisms through which women entrepreneurs exercise bounded agency (Welter et al., 2017; Clark, 2000). It also elaborates the concept of humane entrepreneurship by demonstrating how caring orientations can generate their own form of work-life tension when the entrepreneur bears the emotional weight of both family and team welfare simultaneously (Lim et al., 2022).

4.9. Limitations and Future Research

The study carries several limitations that should inform the interpretation of findings. The use of purposive sampling and the geographic concentration on Makassar limit the generalizability of results to the broader Eastern Indonesian region or to national MSME populations. The study does not measure the direct financial impacts of varying digital HRM practices on business profitability. Although spousal and family support is identified as a significant enabling factor, the specific allocation of domestic labor within participants' households warrants deeper investigation.

Future research directions include: (1) quantitative studies validating these qualitative findings and examining the relationship between digital versus hybrid business models, HRM practices, and measurable business outcomes such as productivity and revenue growth; (2) longitudinal studies tracking how mompreneurs' strategies and identities evolve as their businesses grow and family circumstances change; and (3) comparative studies examining how context-specific cultural, infrastructural, and policy factors shape mompreneur experiences across different Indonesian cities and neighboring Southeast Asian countries.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the lived experiences of mompreneurs in Makassar as they navigate the concurrent demands of digital HRM management and dual identity as mothers and business leaders. The phenomenological analysis demonstrates that these women develop rich, adaptive, and emotionally intelligent management practices in response to resource constraints and identity pressures that formal HRM frameworks were not designed to address. The choice between fully digital and hybrid business models shapes distinct managerial realities, each with its own trade-offs between flexibility and complexity, and each embedded in deeply personal assessments of family needs and tolerance for role conflict.

The emotional dimensions of mompreneur life, chronic guilt, identity dissonance, and the burden of serving simultaneously as nurturing parent, firm leader, and empathetic HR manager are not incidental to their entrepreneurial experience but constitutive of it. Understanding these experiences is essential for designing policies, programs, and digital tools that genuinely support women's economic participation in Eastern Indonesia's rapidly evolving digital economy. In so doing, this research contributes to a growing body of scholarship that insists on the necessity of contextually sensitive, gender-aware, and humanistic approaches to entrepreneurship research and practice.

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