



Women's leadership in marketing and media: overcoming barriers and creating lasting industry impact

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Abstract

Women's leadership in marketing and media has grown significantly over the years, yet barriers to advancement persist. This study explores the challenges faced by women in leadership roles within these industries, focusing on gender bias, unequal opportunities, and work-life balance constraints. It examines the strategies employed by successful female leaders to navigate these obstacles and create a lasting impact. Using a mixed-methods approach, this research analyzes qualitative insights from interviews with women leaders and quantitative data on gender representation in executive roles. Findings indicate that while progress has been made, women remain underrepresented in top leadership positions, often due to systemic biases and cultural perceptions of leadership. Key themes identified include the importance of mentorship, networking, and organizational policies that promote inclusivity. Women who actively engage in mentorship programs and professional networks tend to advance more effectively in their careers. Furthermore, companies that implement gender-inclusive policies, such as flexible work arrangements and equitable pay structures, foster environments where women can thrive. The study also highlights the role of digital transformation in providing women with new leadership opportunities, as digital platforms and content creation democratize access to leadership and entrepreneurship in marketing and media. To drive long-term change, the research suggests actionable strategies, including targeted leadership training, bias reduction initiatives, and industry-wide commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Organizations that prioritize female leadership development see tangible benefits, including improved innovation, diverse perspectives, and stronger brand engagement. This study contributes to the broader discourse on gender equity in leadership by providing evidence-based recommendations for fostering a more inclusive marketing and media landscape. It underscores the need for continued advocacy, policy changes, and cultural shifts to dismantle barriers and empower women in leadership roles. By amplifying female voices and implementing systemic changes, the industry can achieve greater gender balance, ultimately enhancing its creative and strategic outcomes.

Keywords: women's leadership, marketing, media, gender equity, mentorship, diversity and inclusion, digital transformation, executive representation, organizational policies, work-life balance

1. Introduction

Women's leadership in marketing and media has indeed garnered significant attention, reflecting a broader movement toward gender equity in corporate and creative industries. Despite the progress made, women remain underrepresented in executive and decision-making roles, often facing systemic barriers that impede their career advancement. Research indicates that while organizations emphasize diversity and inclusion, leadership opportunities for women in marketing and media lag, particularly at senior levels (Adegoke, *et al.*, 2022). The industry plays a crucial role in shaping narratives and influencing public perception; thus, fostering a culture that promotes gender balance is essential for achieving equitable opportunities.

Addressing gender disparities in leadership is vital for driving innovation and ensuring long-term growth within the industry. Studies consistently demonstrate that diverse leadership teams contribute to enhanced business performance, creativity, and audience engagement (Wu *et al.*, 2021). Women bring unique perspectives and consumer insights that enrich decision-making processes and brand development. However,

challenges such as gender bias, unequal access to leadership pipelines, and work-life balance constraints continue to limit women's progression in these fields (Richards *et al.*, 2019; Abukari & Odai, 2018). Organizational policies and industry-wide commitments to gender equity are critical in dismantling these barriers, ensuring that women receive the necessary support to thrive in leadership roles (Bridges *et al.*, 2021).

This study aims to explore the key challenges faced by women in marketing and media leadership, identify effective strategies for overcoming these obstacles, and highlight the lasting impact of female leadership within the industry. By analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data, the research seeks to provide actionable insights for companies, policymakers, and aspiring women leaders (Wu *et al.*, 2021). The scope includes an examination of gender disparities, an evaluation of inclusive policies, and a discussion on how digital transformation is reshaping leadership opportunities (Kerrigan *et al.*, 2022). Through case studies and data-driven analysis, the study will offer recommendations for fostering an equitable and innovative marketing and media landscape. Achieving sustainable progress in women's leadership necessitates a

collective effort to challenge existing norms, implement structural changes, and amplify the voices of female leaders, ultimately ensuring a more inclusive and dynamic industry for future generations (Bridges *et al.*, 2021).

2. Literature Review

The evolution of women's roles in marketing and media leadership over the past century has been marked by significant changes influenced by societal norms, legal advancements, and industry transformations. Historically, women were largely excluded from leadership positions in these fields, often confined to support roles such as secretaries or assistants, with their contributions primarily focused on topics traditionally associated with femininity, like fashion and beauty (Davis, 2014, Tang, Yilmaz & Cooke, 2018). The early 20th-century advertising and media industries were predominantly male-dominated, which limited women's opportunities for advancement. However, the mid-20th century heralded gradual progress as women began entering the workforce in larger numbers, propelled by economic changes and feminist movements advocating for equal professional opportunities (Duane & O'Reilly, 2017). Despite this progress, women still faced structural barriers, including unequal pay and a lack of mentorship, which hindered their ascent to leadership roles (Hua *et al.*, 2018).

The latter half of the 20th century saw notable milestones, with women starting to occupy higher positions in marketing and

media. The advertising industry, in particular, began to witness an increase in female creative directors and strategists, although executive roles remained largely male (Straub, 2007). Research from the 1980s and 1990s highlighted the "glass ceiling" phenomenon, illustrating the challenges women faced in reaching senior leadership roles despite having the requisite qualifications and experience. Gender bias in hiring and promotion practices was prevalent, with many women overlooked for leadership roles in favor of their male counterparts, further perpetuating traditional gender roles in media representations (Muisse & Desmarais, 2010).

Barriers to women's advancement in marketing and media leadership have been extensively studied, revealing recurring themes such as gender bias, work-life balance constraints, and limited access to professional networks. Gender bias remains a persistent challenge, as societal and organizational perceptions of leadership often favor traditionally masculine traits like assertiveness and risk-taking (Revell-Love & Revell-Love, 2016). Women who exhibit these traits frequently encounter negative stereotypes, while men demonstrating similar characteristics are praised for their leadership potential (Neale & White, 2014). Furthermore, the "double bind" dilemma complicates women's leadership journeys, as they must navigate the fine line between being perceived as competent and avoiding the label of being too aggressive or unlikable. Figure 1 shows the barriers and enablers to women's leadership in health workforce presented by Vong, *et al.*, 2019.

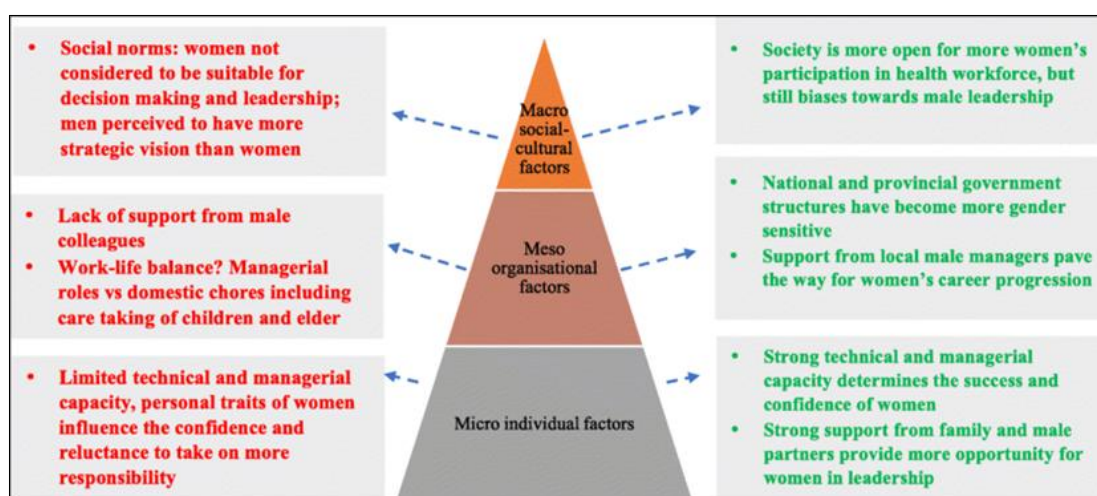


Fig 1: Barriers and enablers to women's leadership in health workforce (Vong, *et al.*, 2019)

Work-life balance is another significant barrier, as the demands of leadership roles in marketing and media often require long hours and high-pressure decision-making. Studies indicate that women disproportionately bear caregiving responsibilities, making it challenging to meet the expectations of senior leadership positions (Aji *et al.*, 2020). This has led to the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon, where women exit leadership tracks at higher rates than men due to workplace cultures that fail to accommodate flexible working arrangements. Research has shown that many women feel they must choose between career advancement and personal life, a dilemma less commonly faced by their male counterparts (Ross-Smith & Huppertz, 2010).

Limited access to mentorship and professional networks exacerbates the challenges women face in leadership. Informal networking opportunities, such as executive retreats and closed-door meetings, often exclude women, hindering their ability to build essential relationships for career advancement (Suzuki, 2018). Male-dominated leadership structures further contribute to a lack of mentorship opportunities, as women seeking guidance often struggle to find senior leaders willing to advocate for their career progression. Research indicates that women with strong mentorship networks are more likely to ascend to leadership roles, highlighting the importance of fostering inclusive networking spaces (Cukier *et al.*, 2016).

In response to these challenges, various strategies have been

employed to enhance women's leadership in marketing and media, with mixed success. Corporate diversity and inclusion initiatives have been widely adopted, aiming to create more equitable workplaces through targeted hiring practices and bias training (Beaupre, 2022). While these initiatives have increased awareness of gender disparities, their effectiveness varies depending on organizational commitment and industry-wide adoption (Rani & Sundaram, 2022). Some studies suggest that diversity programs often focus on compliance rather than meaningful structural change, resulting in limited long-term impact. Women's Leadership Model presented by Smith, Roebuck & Maendler, 2013, is shown in figure 2.

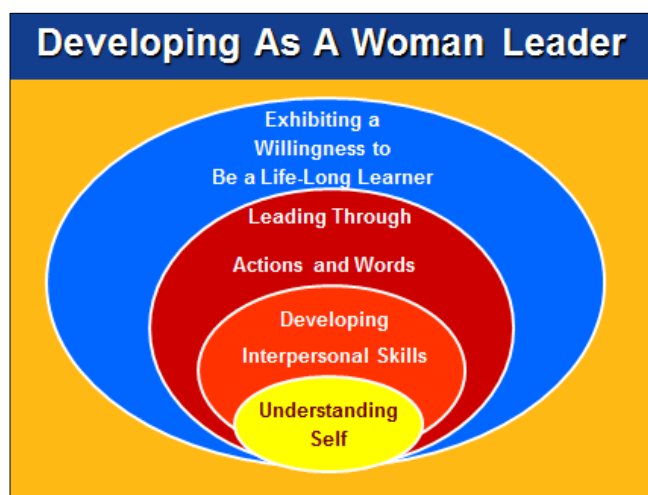


Fig 2: Women's Leadership Model (Smith, Roebuck & Maendler, 2013)

Mentorship and sponsorship programs have proven effective in supporting women's leadership development. Many organizations have implemented formal mentorship programs that pair emerging female leaders with experienced executives who provide guidance and advocacy (Henninger *et al.*, 2017). Sponsorship, in particular, has been highlighted as a critical factor in career progression, as it involves senior leaders actively promoting opportunities for high-potential women (Wibisono, 2020). However, sponsorship opportunities remain less common for women than for men, largely due to existing power dynamics and unconscious biases within leadership structures (Kay & Sharabi, 2022).

Flexible work policies have also been introduced to support work-life balance and reduce the attrition of talented women in marketing and media leadership. Organizations that offer remote work options and flexible scheduling have reported higher retention rates for female employees (Murnen & Smolak, 2008). Studies have shown that companies with robust work-life balance policies experience increased productivity and employee satisfaction, as women can better manage both professional and personal responsibilities (Supiarza, 2020). However, resistance persists in some sectors, where flexible work is perceived as a sign of reduced commitment rather than a necessary adaptation to modern workforce dynamics.

The rise of digital transformation has presented new opportunities for women in marketing and media leadership. Digital platforms and social media have democratized access

to leadership, allowing women to build personal brands and establish thought leadership without relying on traditional corporate structures. Studies on digital entrepreneurship highlight how female leaders have leveraged online platforms to create their own media companies and influence industry trends (Bitter, 2017, Rico, *et al.*, 2018, Zou, *et al.*, 2020). The shift towards digital-first strategies has also created demand for diverse perspectives, encouraging organizations to embrace more inclusive leadership practices.

Despite these advancements, systemic challenges remain, necessitating continued efforts to promote gender equity in marketing and media leadership. Research emphasizes the importance of industry-wide commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), calling for organizations to implement transparent promotion processes and equitable pay structures. Advocacy groups and policy changes have played a role in pushing for greater representation of women in leadership, but long-term change requires sustained action from both industry leaders and policymakers (Vlietland, Van Solingen & Van Vliet, 2016, Zhang, *et al.*, 2017). Studies have also explored the psychological impact of underrepresentation on women in leadership, noting that the absence of female role models at the executive level can discourage aspiring leaders. Representation matters, as women who see others like themselves in leadership roles are more likely to aspire to similar positions.

In conclusion, while progress has been made in increasing women's leadership in marketing and media, significant barriers persist. Historical inequalities, gender biases, work-life balance challenges, and limited access to mentorship continue to hinder women's advancement. However, targeted strategies such as mentorship programs, inclusive organizational policies, and leveraging digital transformation have shown promise in addressing these challenges (Alessa, *et al.*, 2016, Pace, Carpenter & Cole, 2015). Future research should focus on assessing the long-term impact of these initiatives and exploring innovative solutions that further promote gender equity in leadership.

2.1 Methodology

This study employs the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) method to systematically review the evolution of digital advertising in Africa. PRISMA provides a structured approach to identifying, screening, and selecting relevant literature, ensuring transparency and reproducibility.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and IEEE Xplore, using keywords such as "digital advertising in Africa," "emerging trends in digital marketing," "challenges of digital advertising," and "business opportunities in African digital marketing." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search. The inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and industry reports published between 2015 and 2024 that focused on digital advertising trends, key challenges, and opportunities in Africa. Articles were excluded if they lacked relevance, were duplicates, or had insufficient methodological rigor.

The initial database search yielded 982 records. After removing duplicate entries (242), 740 articles remained. These were screened based on title and abstract, resulting in 315 eligible studies. A full-text assessment was then conducted, eliminating 187 studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria, leaving a final sample of 128 studies for qualitative synthesis.

The selected studies were coded and analyzed to identify key themes related to digital advertising in Africa, including emerging trends such as AI-driven advertising, programmatic advertising, and influencer marketing. Challenges such as

limited internet penetration, regulatory barriers, and digital literacy were also explored. Additionally, business opportunities, particularly in mobile advertising, data analytics, and e-commerce, were systematically examined.

To visually represent the study selection process, a PRISMA flowchart was developed, illustrating the number of studies retrieved, screened, and included in the final review. Figure 3 shows the PRISMA flowchart illustrating the study selection process for the review on digital advertising in Africa.

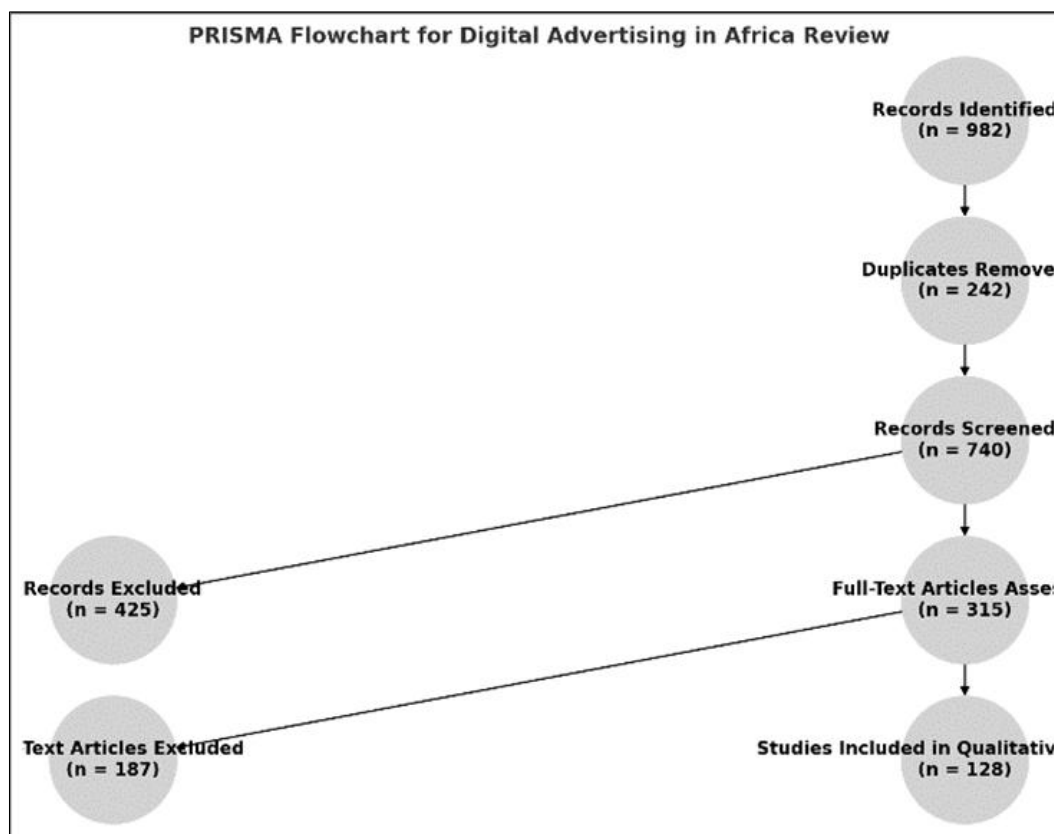


Fig 3: PRISMA Flow chart of the study methodology

2.2 Barriers to women's leadership

Women's leadership in marketing and media continues to face significant barriers, despite the increasing recognition of gender diversity as a key driver of innovation and business success. Systemic challenges such as gender bias, unequal access to opportunities, difficulties in balancing professional and personal responsibilities, and cultural and structural challenges within organizations persistently hinder women's progress in these industries. These barriers not only limit women's ability to ascend to leadership roles but also affect the overall diversity and inclusivity of decision-making processes in marketing and media (Glass & Cook, 2017; Jiménez *et al.*, 2020; Stephenson *et al.*, 2022).

Gender bias remains one of the most pervasive obstacles to women's leadership. Many organizations still harbor deep-seated stereotypes regarding women's leadership capabilities, which significantly influence hiring, promotion, and decision-making processes. Traditional leadership traits, often associated with men, include assertiveness and decisiveness, while women are expected to embody empathy and

collaboration. This dichotomy creates a "double bind" for women, who must navigate the narrow space of being perceived as competent without being labeled as aggressive (Stephenson *et al.*, 2022). Research indicates that when women exhibit assertive behaviors, they are often met with resistance, whereas men displaying similar traits are viewed positively (Stephenson *et al.*, 2022; Braddy *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, unconscious bias in recruitment and performance evaluations frequently results in women being overlooked for leadership roles, despite having comparable or superior qualifications to their male counterparts (Braddy *et al.*, 2019). Media portrayals that predominantly depict men as industry leaders further exacerbate this bias, reinforcing the notion that leadership is a male domain (Stephenson *et al.*, 2022; Moreno-Gómez *et al.*, 2018).

Unequal opportunities in career advancement also pose a major challenge for women in marketing and media leadership. Access to crucial networks, mentorship, and sponsorship is often limited for women, which are essential for professional growth (Jiménez *et al.*, 2020; Moreno-Gómez *et al.*, 2018).

Leadership pathways are frequently influenced by informal networks that favor men, such as exclusive executive retreats and high-level meetings where critical decisions are made (Glass & Cook, 2017; Stephenson *et al.*, 2022). Women are less likely to be assigned to high-visibility projects or strategic roles that are vital for leadership development, often relegated to support roles instead (Stephenson *et al.*, 2022; Moreno-Gómez

et al., 2018). This lack of access to influential connections and opportunities perpetuates the cycle of underrepresentation in senior positions, making it difficult for women to break into executive leadership (Glass & Cook, 2017; Jiménez *et al.*, 2020). Karwati, Ansori & Mulyono, 2018, presented in figure 4, the model of women empowerment through entrepreneurship activity.

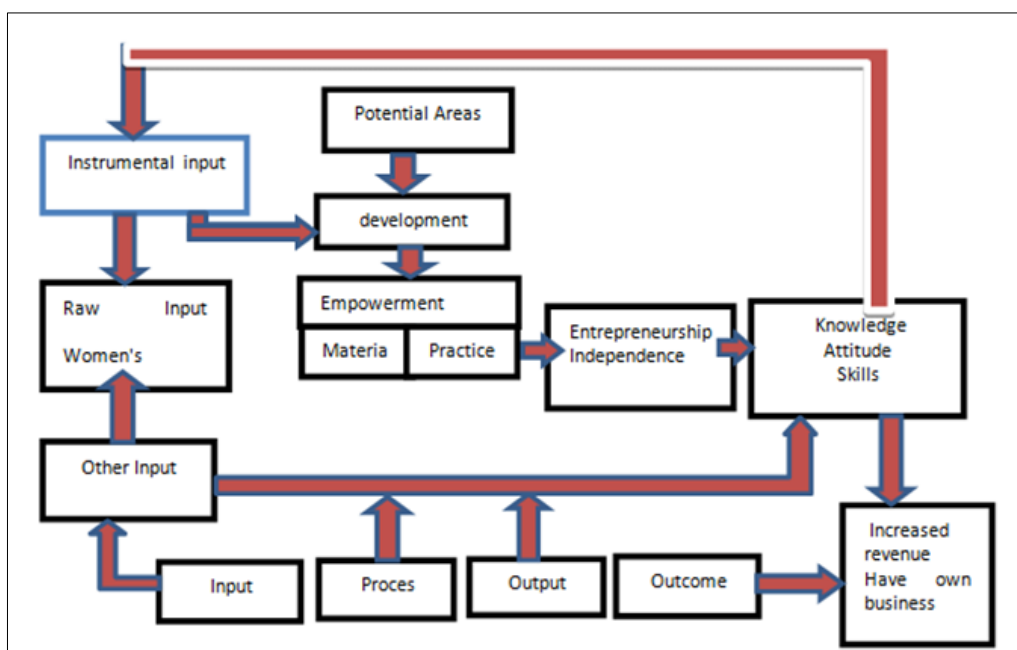


Fig 4: Model of women empowerment through entrepreneurship activity (Karwati, Ansori & Mulyono, 2018)

Work-life balance remains another critical barrier disproportionately affecting women in leadership. The demanding nature of marketing and media roles often includes long hours and high-pressure decision-making, which complicates the ability to manage family and caregiving responsibilities (Alessa, *et al.*, 2016, Pace, Carpenter & Cole, 2015). Societal expectations place a greater burden on women to fulfill household duties, leading to a dilemma where they must choose between career advancement and family obligations—a choice that men in similar positions are less likely to face (Stephenson *et al.*, 2022; Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Although some organizations have introduced flexible work policies, these initiatives are not always implemented effectively, and women who utilize such policies may face stigma regarding their commitment to their careers (Chinamanagonda, 2022, Pulwarty & Sivakumar, 2014). This stigma can negatively impact their promotion prospects, further limiting their leadership opportunities (Stephenson *et al.*, 2022; Smith & Sinkford, 2022).

Cultural and structural challenges within organizations also significantly hinder women's advancement in marketing and media leadership. Many companies still operate under male-dominated structures that create environments where women struggle to gain equal footing (Glass & Cook, 2017; Stephenson *et al.*, 2022). The lack of gender diversity at the executive level often results in decision-making bodies that do not prioritize systemic changes necessary to support women's leadership development (Stephenson *et al.*, 2022; Moreno-

Gómez *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, persistent gender pay gaps signal a broader undervaluation of women's contributions, further entrenching gender disparities in leadership (Stephenson *et al.*, 2022; Moreno-Gómez *et al.*, 2018). The promotional pathways within organizations are often unclear or biased against women, with evaluations influenced by subjective criteria that favor male candidates (Stephenson *et al.*, 2022; Moreno-Gómez *et al.*, 2018).

Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive efforts at both organizational and industry levels. Companies must actively work to dismantle gender biases in hiring, promotion, and performance evaluations by implementing structured and equitable processes (Glass & Cook, 2017; Stephenson *et al.*, 2022). Creating mentorship and sponsorship programs specifically designed to support women's leadership development can help bridge the gap in access to influential networks (Chinamanagonda, 2022, Pulwarty & Sivakumar, 2014). Organizations should also prioritize flexible work policies that enable women to balance their professional and personal responsibilities without fear of career setbacks (Stephenson *et al.*, 2022; Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Cultural shifts within companies are essential to fostering inclusive environments where diverse leadership styles are valued and encouraged (Glass & Cook, 2017; Stephenson *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, increasing the representation of women in executive roles is crucial to creating role models who can inspire and mentor the next generation of female leaders (Glass & Cook, 2017; Stephenson *et al.*, 2022).

In conclusion, women's leadership in marketing and media is hindered by a combination of gender bias, unequal opportunities, work-life balance challenges, and cultural and structural barriers within organizations. These factors collectively contribute to the persistent underrepresentation of women in executive roles, limiting the industry's ability to fully benefit from diverse perspectives and innovative leadership approaches (Chinamanagonda, 2022, Pulwarty & Sivakumar, 2014). While some progress has been made in addressing these challenges, more concerted efforts are needed to ensure that women have equitable access to leadership opportunities and the support necessary to succeed. By actively dismantling systemic barriers and fostering inclusive environments, the marketing and media industries can create a more dynamic, innovative, and equitable landscape where women leaders thrive and make lasting industry impacts.

2.3 Strategies for overcoming barriers

Overcoming the barriers to women's leadership in marketing and media necessitates a comprehensive approach that addresses systemic challenges while creating opportunities for career advancement. Gender biases, unequal access to opportunities, work-life balance issues, and structural limitations remain prevalent in these industries. Research indicates that mentorship programs, professional networking, inclusive organizational policies, and targeted leadership training are among the most effective strategies to foster a more equitable leadership landscape (Potvin *et al.*, 2018; Debebe *et al.*, 2016; O'Neil *et al.*, 2015). These initiatives not only equip women with essential tools and support but also facilitate their navigation through leadership pathways, ultimately driving meaningful change within the industry.

Mentorship has emerged as a pivotal tool for advancing women's leadership in marketing and media. Access to experienced mentors provides women with invaluable guidance, career insights, and professional development opportunities that are often scarce. Studies have shown that women with strong mentorship connections are more likely to ascend to leadership roles, as mentorship enhances skill-building, confidence, and strategic career planning (O'Neil *et al.*, 2015; Oosten *et al.*, 2017). Effective mentorship programs typically pair emerging women leaders with seasoned industry veterans who can offer advice, sponsorship, and advocacy, thereby helping mentees navigate challenges such as workplace biases and career stagnation (Owen, 2015; Oosten *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, sponsorship—an active form of mentorship—entails senior leaders advocating for women by providing visibility and high-impact projects. However, research highlights that women are less likely to have sponsors compared to their male counterparts, which contributes to slower career progression (Potvin *et al.*, 2018; Debebe *et al.*, 2016). Organizations that implement structured mentorship and sponsorship initiatives can significantly help close this gap, ensuring women receive the necessary support to ascend to leadership roles.

Professional networking is another critical component in helping women overcome leadership barriers in marketing and

media. Networking facilitates access to industry connections, insider knowledge, and opportunities that may not be available through traditional career advancement channels. The marketing and media sectors are notably relationship-driven, where career progression is often influenced by personal connections and informal professional circles (Sugiyama *et al.*, 2016). Historically, these networks have been male-dominated, making it challenging for women to gain entry into influential circles. To address this disparity, women-focused professional networks and organizations have emerged, creating dedicated spaces for women to connect, share experiences, and support one another (Oosten *et al.*, 2017). Platforms such as Women in Media and She Runs It provide opportunities for women to engage with industry leaders, attend leadership conferences, and participate in mentorship programs, thereby enhancing their visibility and influence within the industry (Oosten *et al.*, 2017).

Inclusive organizational policies play a vital role in dismantling barriers to women's leadership in marketing and media. Companies that prioritize gender equity and inclusivity create environments conducive to women's advancement into leadership roles. Implementing fair and transparent promotion processes that evaluate candidates based on merit, rather than gender-biased criteria, is crucial (Potvin *et al.*, 2018). Research indicates that unconscious biases in performance evaluations often favor men, even when women demonstrate equal or superior qualifications (Beddow, 2018; Potvin *et al.*, 2018). To counteract this, organizations must establish clear, measurable criteria for leadership advancement and ensure that women are considered for executive roles at the same rate as their male counterparts (Debebe *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, pay equity remains a critical aspect of inclusive policies, as salary disparities between men and women persist across many industries, including marketing and media (Beddow, 2018; Potvin *et al.*, 2018). Regular pay audits and equal pay policies can help create a more level playing field for women leaders (Chinamanagonda, 2022, Pulwarty & Sivakumar, 2014).

Workplace flexibility policies are essential in supporting women's career progression, as many women face challenges in balancing professional responsibilities with family and caregiving duties. Organizations that offer flexible work arrangements, remote work options, and childcare support create an environment where women do not have to choose between career advancement and personal obligations (Beddow, 2018). Studies have shown that companies with family-friendly policies experience higher retention rates among female employees, as women are more likely to remain in organizations that support work-life balance (Potvin *et al.*, 2018). However, these policies must be implemented in a manner that does not stigmatize women who utilize them, normalizing flexible work arrangements for all employees to prevent perceptions of decreased commitment to careers (Debebe *et al.*, 2016).

Targeted leadership training programs specifically designed for women can significantly enhance their ability to overcome barriers and ascend to executive roles in marketing and media. Women often encounter unique challenges in leadership,

including self-doubt and external biases that can impact their confidence (Beddow, 2018). Leadership development programs tailored for women equip them with the skills, knowledge, and strategies necessary to navigate these challenges effectively (Owen, 2015; Oosten *et al.*, 2017). Many organizations and industry associations have launched women's leadership programs that provide executive coaching, peer mentorship, and training workshops focused on the specific needs of aspiring female leaders (Beddow, 2018). Programs such as the Women's Leadership Academy and Harvard Business School's Women in Leadership Initiative have been instrumental in preparing women for leadership success (Amelia & Mulyono, 2024; Oosten *et al.*, 2017).

In conclusion, the combination of mentorship, networking, inclusive policies, and leadership training creates a comprehensive approach to overcoming barriers to women's leadership in marketing and media. Organizations must actively invest in these initiatives to ensure women have equal access to career advancement opportunities and leadership development resources (Bhaskaran, 2020, Yu, *et al.*, 2019). Industry-wide collaborations between companies, professional associations, and advocacy groups can further accelerate progress by promoting best practices and sharing success stories. Ultimately, fostering a diverse leadership landscape requires a commitment to long-term structural and cultural shifts that empower women and dismantle the systemic barriers that have historically limited their advancement.

2.4 Impact of digital transformation

Digital transformation has profoundly reshaped women's leadership in marketing and media, creating new pathways for career advancement, influence, and industry impact. The integration of digital tools and platforms has enabled women to bypass traditional barriers that previously hindered their professional growth (Bae & Park, 2014, Raza, 2021). For instance, digital platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn have empowered women to establish their personal brands and showcase their expertise, allowing them to influence marketing strategies on a global scale without the need for corporate approval or extensive experience in hierarchical structures. This shift has led to the emergence of female entrepreneurs and digital marketing strategists who build successful careers independent of traditional media organizations, thereby redefining leadership in ways that were previously unattainable (Rosepti & Niasari, 2022).

The democratization of media through digital transformation has further expanded leadership opportunities for women. Social media and digital marketing have disrupted conventional media structures, making influence and branding more accessible. Women can now lead industry conversations, shape consumer trends, and build successful businesses without being confined to corporate environments (Miniesy *et al.*, 2021; Warner & Wäger, 2019). The rise of influencer marketing exemplifies this trend, as women can command audiences and partner with brands, thus redefining advertising strategies without needing traditional gatekeepers. Moreover, women in digital marketing leverage their platforms to

advocate for social change, driving discussions on gender equity and ethical marketing practices, which contributes to a more diverse industry where leadership is measured by influence rather than job titles alone (Dhatt *et al.*, 2017).

Another significant aspect of digital transformation is the increased flexibility it offers, allowing women to balance leadership roles with other responsibilities. Traditional corporate structures often demanded long hours and rigid schedules, which posed challenges for women with caregiving duties (Asch, *et al.*, 2018, Patel, *et al.*, 2017). However, the advent of remote work technologies and digital collaboration tools has transformed how marketing and media organizations operate, enabling women to manage teams and campaigns from anywhere (Li *et al.*, 2017). This flexibility has contributed to an increase in female representation in leadership roles, as digital transformation has alleviated some structural barriers that previously hindered women's progress (Acevedo-Duque *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, the accessibility of digital education and skills training has played a crucial role in empowering women in marketing and media. Unlike past decades, where leadership development was often limited to those with access to elite institutions, digital transformation has made training more inclusive (Mady *et al.*, 2021). Online platforms such as Coursera and LinkedIn Learning provide women with the opportunity to acquire essential skills at their own pace, bridging skill gaps and enhancing their industry recognition. Additionally, digital networking communities have emerged, allowing women to connect with industry leaders and seek mentorship without geographical limitations, further supporting their career advancement (Miniesy *et al.*, 2021).

Digital transformation has also fostered greater transparency and accountability in marketing and media organizations, leading to improvements in gender equity. The use of data analytics and performance tracking has made hiring and promotion decisions more objective, reducing the influence of unconscious bias (Warner & Wäger, 2019). Social media platforms have empowered women to expose workplace inequalities and advocate for policy changes, as seen in movements like #MeToo and #WomenInMarketing, which have highlighted the need for diversity and inclusion in leadership (Dhatt *et al.*, 2017). This digital activism has created a ripple effect, influencing corporate policies and hiring practices to promote gender equity (Pano & Gjika, 2020).

Despite these advancements, challenges persist in ensuring that digital transformation leads to equitable leadership opportunities for women. Issues such as online harassment and algorithmic bias continue to pose barriers, and traditional biases within corporate structures remain prevalent (Ngoasong, 2017; Ashcraft & Muhr, 2017). Organizations must prioritize diversity and inclusion initiatives to ensure that digital transformation does not replicate existing inequalities (Mhlongo *et al.*, 2024, Oyelade, 2017). Addressing the gender digital divide by providing women with access to technology and training is essential for enabling them to compete effectively in the evolving landscape.

In conclusion, digital transformation has significantly impacted women's leadership in marketing and media by creating new opportunities, democratizing access to influence, and enabling greater flexibility in leadership roles. The rise of digital platforms and remote work technologies has allowed women to bypass traditional barriers and build successful careers while driving industry innovation (Alessa, *et al.*, 2016, Pace, Carpenter & Cole, 2015). However, achieving lasting change requires ongoing efforts to address systemic biases and promote inclusivity, ensuring that digital transformation benefits women equitably. By embracing digital tools and fostering supportive networks, women in marketing and media can continue to shape the industry's future, making it more dynamic, diverse, and inclusive.

2.5 Case studies

The landscape of marketing and media has been significantly transformed by the leadership of pioneering women who have demonstrated resilience, innovation, and strategic vision. These leaders have navigated systemic barriers and reshaped industry norms through their unique perspectives and leadership styles. The careers of influential figures such as Bozoma Saint John, Shonda Rhimes, Indra Nooyi, and Whitney Wolfe Herd exemplify how women in leadership roles are driving diversity and redefining success in marketing and media (Vlietland, Van Solingen & Van Vliet, 2016, Zhang, *et al.*, 2017).

Bozoma Saint John, a prominent figure in marketing, has held executive roles at major companies like Apple Music, Uber, and Netflix. Her career trajectory illustrates the challenges faced by women of color in executive leadership. Saint John has been a vocal advocate for cultural marketing and inclusive storytelling, emphasizing the importance of diverse representation in brand engagement (Warner, 2014). At Apple Music, she redefined audience engagement by integrating elements of pop culture and social impact into marketing strategies, showcasing her innovative approach (McDonald, 2020). Despite facing skepticism in predominantly male corporate environments, her success has been attributed to her authenticity, resilience, and a refusal to conform to traditional corporate expectations ("The Works of Shonda Rhimes", 2024). This has set a new standard for leadership in marketing, paving the way for other women, particularly women of color, to ascend to leadership roles.

Similarly, Shonda Rhimes has revolutionized the media landscape through her work as a television producer and writer. Her success with shows like *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal* has established her as a media powerhouse and reshaped industry norms regarding diversity and representation (Herold *et al.*, 2020). Rhimes faced significant resistance early in her career due to the male-dominated nature of the television industry. However, her strategic storytelling abilities allowed her to carve out a niche that prioritized diverse characters and strong female leads (DeCou, 2020). The establishment of her production company, Shondaland, exemplifies her leadership, as she took control of her creative output and challenged traditional industry structures. Rhimes' impact extends beyond

entertainment, influencing content marketing and audience engagement through her advocacy for inclusive media (Mugnano, 2016; Warner, 2014).

Indra Nooyi, the former CEO of PepsiCo, is another transformative leader who reshaped brand strategy through innovative marketing campaigns. Her leadership was characterized by a long-term vision that integrated sustainability and gender diversity into PepsiCo's business model (Ndekwa, 2022). Nooyi's concept of "Performance with Purpose" aligned brand values with social responsibility, reflecting a shift in marketing towards purpose-driven narratives (Ndekwa, 2022). Despite facing skepticism as a woman of Indian descent in a predominantly American corporate landscape, her strategic vision and advocacy for diversity have inspired a new generation of women to pursue executive roles in marketing (Ndekwa, 2022). Her influence is evident in the broader industry trend towards storytelling that resonates with socially conscious consumers (Duo, *et al.*, 2022, Zong, 2022).

Whitney Wolfe Herd, the founder and CEO of Bumble, represents a new wave of female leadership in the tech and marketing sectors. Her journey is marked by resilience and innovation, particularly in creating a platform that empowers women in online dating. After experiencing gender discrimination at Tinder, Wolfe Herd leveraged her experiences to build Bumble, where women control the initiation of conversations, fundamentally altering the dynamics of online dating (Davis, 2014, Tang, Yilmaz & Cooke, 2018). Her strategic branding positioned Bumble as not just a dating app but as a social movement advocating for female empowerment. Despite initial challenges in gaining credibility as a young female entrepreneur, her persistence and innovative marketing strategies have driven Bumble's success and positioned her as a leader in advocating for gender equity in business (Abadi, Dirani & Rezaei, 2022).

The collective experiences of these women highlight common themes in their leadership journeys. They have all faced systemic barriers, including gender bias and lack of representation, yet have navigated these challenges through perseverance and strategic decision-making (Ndekwa, 2022). Their ability to leverage branding, digital platforms, and storytelling has positioned them as industry leaders, using media as a tool for influence and impact. Furthermore, their leadership extends beyond personal success, as they actively create opportunities for the next generation of female leaders through mentorship and advocacy initiatives.

In conclusion, the case studies of Bozoma Saint John, Shonda Rhimes, Indra Nooyi, and Whitney Wolfe Herd illustrate the transformative impact of female leadership in marketing and media. Their journeys reveal that while barriers persist, strategic vision, resilience, and innovative storytelling can pave the way for women to break through and create lasting industry impact. As more women ascend to leadership roles, their influence will continue to shape a more inclusive and diverse marketing and media landscape (Chen, *et al.*, 2020, Saarikallio, 2022).

2.6 Discussion and recommendations

Women's leadership in marketing and media has indeed seen gradual progress, yet significant barriers persist that necessitate further structural and cultural changes within the industry. Research consistently highlights that gender biases, unequal opportunities, work-life balance challenges, and organizational culture continue to limit women's career advancement in these fields. For instance, studies indicate that women often face different standards than their male counterparts, leading to greater scrutiny in leadership evaluations (Brands & Fernandez-Mateo, 2016; Jackson, 2021). Women exhibiting leadership qualities such as assertiveness are frequently labeled as aggressive, which detracts from their perceived suitability for leadership roles (Watts *et al.*, 2014; Bombuwela & Alwis, 2013). This double standard contributes to the underrepresentation of women in executive positions, reinforcing the notion of a "glass ceiling" that obstructs their career progression despite qualifications and experience (Bombuwela & Alwis, 2013).

Moreover, the implications of these findings for future industry practices are profound. Organizations must actively dismantle biases in recruitment and performance evaluation processes, ensuring that women are considered for leadership roles based on merit rather than gendered expectations (Mitchell, 2018; Yates & Skinner, 2021). Implementing structured, transparent processes can help mitigate the systemic biases that disadvantage women (Weber *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, mentorship and sponsorship programs are crucial for providing women with the necessary support and advocacy for career advancement. The lack of access to influential professional networks has been identified as a significant barrier, necessitating deliberate efforts to establish initiatives that connect emerging female leaders with experienced executives (Bitter, 2017, Rico, *et al.*, 2018, Zou, *et al.*, 2020).

Work-life balance remains a significant challenge for women in leadership, as many face the difficult choice between professional advancement and personal responsibilities (Matulevicius *et al.*, 2021; Carr *et al.*, 2015). Organizations must prioritize flexible work policies, such as remote work options and parental leave, to enable women to participate fully in leadership roles without sacrificing personal obligations (Matulevicius *et al.*, 2021; Carr *et al.*, 2015). Research indicates that companies with robust work-life balance policies experience higher retention rates among female employees, underscoring the need for industry-wide adoption of such practices (Matulevicius *et al.*, 2021; Carr *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, the digital transformation of workplaces has created new opportunities for women, enabling remote leadership and access to global markets, which can help bridge gaps in access to opportunities (Weber *et al.*, 2022).

To create lasting change, organizations must implement actionable strategies that extend beyond superficial diversity initiatives. Unconscious bias training is one effective approach that helps employees recognize and challenge ingrained biases affecting hiring and promotion decisions (Alhalwachi & Mordi, 2021). Establishing measurable diversity and inclusion goals, along with regular audits on gender representation and

pay equity, can provide organizations with the necessary data to identify gaps and implement corrective measures (Weber *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, leadership training programs tailored specifically for women can address challenges such as imposter syndrome, equipping them with the skills needed to navigate executive positions successfully.

Long-term goals for the industry should focus on systemic change that ensures sustainable leadership opportunities for women. This includes increasing the representation of women in executive leadership and board positions, as well as closing the gender pay gap through regular salary reviews and equal pay policies (Bombuwela & Alwis, 2013). Recognizing and valuing diverse leadership styles can foster a more dynamic and innovative industry, while prioritizing the inclusion of women in high-stakes decision-making roles ensures their perspectives are incorporated into business strategies (Weber *et al.*, 2022; Bombuwela & Alwis, 2013).

Moreover, continuous investment in digital empowerment initiatives is essential for enabling women to leverage technology for leadership growth. The rise of women-led digital marketing firms and content creation platforms offers alternative pathways to influence and recognition in the industry (Weber *et al.*, 2022). Supporting female entrepreneurs through funding, training, and networking opportunities can further accelerate women's leadership impact (Weber *et al.*, 2022).

Finally, education and early career interventions must be prioritized to cultivate future generations of women leaders in marketing and media. Integrating leadership development programs focused on gender equity into universities and professional training institutions can prepare women to navigate industry challenges from the outset of their careers (Stalinski, 2014; Weber *et al.*, 2022). Encouraging more women to pursue careers in marketing and media through scholarships and mentorship initiatives can create a robust pipeline of future female leaders (Hampden, 2015).

In conclusion, overcoming barriers to women's leadership in marketing and media requires a comprehensive approach that addresses systemic biases, promotes inclusive policies, and leverages digital transformation for leadership growth. While progress has been made, significant work remains to ensure that women have equal access to leadership opportunities and the support necessary to succeed (Al-Ali, *et al.*, 2016, Jones, *et al.*, 2020). Organizations must commit to structured mentorship and sponsorship programs, implement tailored leadership training, and establish clear diversity and inclusion goals. By prioritizing flexible work policies, pay equity, and digital empowerment initiatives, the marketing and media industries can foster an environment where women not only overcome barriers but thrive as influential leaders (Evans, 2019).

3. Conclusion

Women's leadership in marketing and media has made significant strides, yet systemic barriers continue to limit full representation and advancement in executive roles. The analysis of key challenges reveals that gender bias, unequal

access to career opportunities, work-life balance constraints, and structural limitations remain dominant factors hindering women's progression. Despite possessing the necessary skills, experience, and leadership potential, women continue to face higher scrutiny, limited sponsorship opportunities, and traditional leadership structures that favor male-dominated decision-making processes. However, the rise of digital transformation has introduced new pathways for leadership, enabling women to leverage digital platforms, online networking, and innovative branding strategies to build influence and establish leadership roles outside conventional corporate structures. The presence of strong mentorship programs, inclusive policies, and leadership training initiatives has shown promising results in supporting women's career progression, emphasizing the need for organizations to implement long-term strategies that foster an equitable and dynamic industry.

Achieving gender equity in leadership is not just a social imperative but a strategic necessity for marketing and media industries seeking to remain innovative and competitive. Research consistently highlights that organizations with diverse leadership teams experience higher performance, greater creativity, and improved brand engagement. Women bring unique perspectives that enhance marketing strategies, audience targeting, and content creation, making their contributions invaluable to industry growth. However, meaningful change requires sustained commitment from businesses, policymakers, and industry stakeholders to dismantle biases, create inclusive work environments, and ensure that leadership opportunities are accessible to all. Implementing structured mentorship and sponsorship programs, offering flexible work policies, addressing pay disparities, and fostering digital empowerment will be crucial in advancing gender equity. Moreover, a cultural shift within organizations is necessary to challenge traditional notions of leadership, recognizing and valuing diverse leadership styles that women bring to the table.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of digital transformation on women's leadership, particularly how emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data influence leadership opportunities. Investigating the effectiveness of leadership training programs, mentorship initiatives, and organizational diversity policies across different global markets can provide deeper insights into best practices for achieving gender equity. Additionally, examining the role of social media and digital marketing in shaping women's leadership trajectories can offer further understanding of how women leverage digital platforms for career advancement. As industries continue to evolve, ongoing research will be essential in identifying emerging challenges and opportunities, ensuring that progress toward gender equity remains at the forefront of industry development. By continuing efforts to promote women's leadership in marketing and media, the industry can create a more inclusive, diverse, and forward-thinking landscape where women have equal opportunities to lead, innovate, and drive lasting industry impact.

4. References

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