

Exploring the Darker Dimensions of Digital Entrepreneurship: Risks, Tensions and Unintended Consequences

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Abstract

This editorial introduces the Special Issue on the darker dimensions of digital entrepreneurship. While digitalisation has been widely associated with opportunity, empowerment, and innovation, the contributions in this issue demonstrate how it simultaneously produces constraints, asymmetries, and unintended consequences that complicate these optimistic narratives. Taken together, the five articles explore paradoxes within digital business models, consider the social and economic dimensions of platform-based work, and reflect on the evolving futures shaped by emerging technologies in entrepreneurial ecosystems. This highlights the need for more developed theoretical perspectives capable of capturing both the opportunities and the constraints inherent in digital entrepreneurship. Although the extent to which these darker dimensions are explicitly addressed varies across the articles, each offers important insights into the frictions and contradictions that characterise digitally mediated entrepreneurial activity. By bringing these perspectives into dialogue, this Special Issue advances a more critical understanding of digital entrepreneurship, moving beyond celebratory accounts to engage with its sociotechnical complexities. The editorial situates the Special Issue within the broader literature, introduces the individual contributions and outlines a future research agenda.

Introduction

Digital entrepreneurship has undergone a profound evolution over the past decade, transforming the ways in which entrepreneurial actors identify opportunities, mobilise resources, and orchestrate value creation in technology-mediated contexts (Nambisan, 2017; Audretsch et al., 2023). The expanding pervasiveness of digital technologies has not only reconfigured entrepreneurial processes but has also enabled novel modes of venture emergence (Sitaridis and Kitsios, 2024). Prior scholarship demonstrates that digital technologies significantly compress the temporal and cognitive burdens associated with opportunity ideation and evaluation (Elia et al., 2020), while simultaneously fostering new venture forms characterised by distributed agency, non-linear organisation, and increasingly permeable socio-technical boundaries (Autio et al., 2018). Digital entrepreneurship has been heralded as a new frontier of entrepreneurial activity, notably reducing traditional barriers such as limited access to resources and gender discrimination, while also enabling platforms that support free expression for community builders and influencers (Castelló et al., 2026; Troise et al., 2022a). Influential digital ventures have profoundly reshaped society, reconfiguring individual behaviours, organisational practices, and broader patterns of social interaction (Nambisan,

2017). The evident pervasiveness of GAFAM¹ firms should not obscure the significance of smaller yet still highly impactful digital enterprises, which either use them as enablers (e.g. influencer-entrepreneurs, app creators) or have been integrated into their ecosystems through acquisition (e.g. YouTube by Google and Instagram by Meta) (Nambisan and Baron, 2021; Cutolo and Kenney, 2021). At the same time, entrepreneurial activity within established organisations is increasingly manifested through digitalisation processes, aimed at enhancing operational efficiency, improving employee well-being and work–life balance, and strengthening overall organisational performance (Kallmuenzer et al., 2025; Abubakre et al., 2021; Ladeira et al., 2019). Collectively these developments have fundamentally reconfigured the ways in which individuals work and live.

However, emerging research has begun to complicate early assumptions regarding the inherently democratising effects of digitalisation (Berger et al., 2021). Rather than uniformly reducing barriers to entrepreneurial participation, recent studies highlight the persistence and in some cases amplification of structural inequalities, algorithmic forms of bias, and dependencies on platform-governed infrastructures (Nambisan, 2017; Martinez Dy et al., 2017; Heizmann and Liu, 2022). The increasing reliance of digital entrepreneurship on the extraction and mobilisation of user data has prompted policymakers to develop regulatory frameworks governing data use, most notably the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), alongside comparable initiatives in the United States. Individual interactions within and across organisations have been profoundly reconfigured by digitalisation, frequently displacing direct human engagement with technologically mediated forms of communication (Mazmanian et al., 2013). Although social networks have transformed communication in many positive ways, their more problematic dimensions particularly those related to surveillance, addiction, and data exploitation are increasingly visible through contemporary media representations. Documentaries such as *The Social Dilemma*, *Five Women*, and *Kidfluencer*, alongside the growing visibility of litigation concerning the addictive properties of certain platforms, have brought these issues to the forefront. At the same time, several dimensions of digital entrepreneurship remain underexplored, including the ethical implications of big data and the reproduction of existing social inequalities (Cutolo and Kenney, 2021). These insights underscore that digital entrepreneurship unfolds within sociotechnical ecosystems that redistribute agency in uneven ways, particularly along gendered and structural lines (Kelly and McAdam, 2025; Nambisan, 2017), raising critical questions about who is empowered, who is marginalised, and under what conditions. More broadly, this highlights the relative neglect of the societal implications of digital entrepreneurship, particularly in a context where businesses are increasingly expected to contribute to the public good (Randerson, 2023; Witesman et al., 2023).

Hence, while prior research has enriched theoretical understandings of digitally enabled entrepreneurship (Nambisan, 2017; Cutolo and Kenney, 2021), it simultaneously reveals persistent tensions associated with dispersed agency, platform dependency, and the erosion of conventional organisational boundaries. Taken together, these strands of work point to a growing misalignment between the rapid evolution of digital technologies and their adoption and the conceptual frameworks available to analyse them. As such, there is a pressing need for more robust theorisation that can account for both the generative and the problematic dimensions of digital entrepreneurship. The contributions within this Special Issue respond directly to this imperative. The articles interrogate the tensions embedded within digital business models, unpack the social ramifications of platform-based labour and venture formation, and speculate on future trajectories shaped by emergent technologies. Through this

¹ GAFAM refers to Google (Alphabet), Apple, Facebook (Meta), Amazon, and Microsoft.

collective scholarly engagement, the Special Issue seeks to advance a more reflexive, and theoretically generative understanding of digital entrepreneurship, one that attends not only to its innovative potential but also to the sociotechnical frictions, contradictions, and dilemmas that accompany contemporary digital transformation.

Aim of Editorial

As digital technologies increasingly disrupt established business configurations, it is critical to analyse their wider impacts on individuals, economies, and societies (Randerson and Estrada-Robles, 2023). As Corvello et al. (2022) and Troise et al. (2022b) observe, the digital revolution continues to fundamentally transform entrepreneurial activity, accelerating opportunity creation while simultaneously intensifying uncertainties and ethical dilemmas. While these developments offer exciting possibilities, they also surface questions linked to power asymmetries, governance, and precarity in digital environments. It is these questions that this Special Issue sought to address by offering the opportunity to stimulate scholarly conversations around the multifaceted challenges that may arise in the digital entrepreneurship realm.

Topic overview and rationale for the Special Issue

This Special Issue offers a curated collection of articles that together reveal that digitalisation, while often positioned as a catalyst for opportunity, also generates new layers of complexity that fundamentally challenge established understandings of entrepreneurship. What unites the perspectives offered in this Special Issue is a commitment to expanding the boundaries of entrepreneurship scholarship by highlighting dimensions of the digital landscape that remain insufficiently explored. Their insights invite the field to adopt a more critical lens, one capable of capturing the tensions, contradictions and systemic consequences that accompany the rapid digital transformation of entrepreneurial activity. This Special Issue aims to serve as both a reflection on current developments and a foundation for continued research into the multifaceted and, at times, problematic realities of digital entrepreneurship.

The contributions in this Special Issue engage with several of the topics proposed in the Call for Papers including paradoxes of digital entrepreneurship, the dark side of digital entrepreneurship, unintended consequences, and the specific challenges associated with social media entrepreneurship. Taken together, these topics may be conceptually organised into three overarching themes that provide the analytical structure for our discussion: Ecosystems and Platforms as Shapers of Entrepreneurial Conditions and Dependencies (Theme 1); Digitalisation as a Transformative Process Involving Identity and Relational Negotiation (Theme 2); and Enablement and Precarity as Two Sides of the Same Digital Coin (Theme 3). Some topics from the original Call for Papers such as ethical dilemmas, work-life balance, and digital divide and social inequality, remain largely unaddressed in the selected articles and are therefore included in the future research agenda (Table 2).

Presentation of the Articles

Below we present each of the articles included in this Special Issue, highlighting their main contributions and, for each, key insights from the research. The articles cover a range of geographical locations, methods, and theoretical frameworks (see Table 1 for overview).

Insert Table 1 about here

We open with the article that probably most directly captures the paradox at the heart of this Special Issue: that the very forces enabling digital entrepreneurship are inextricably intertwined

with its detrimental consequences. **Chris Carter and colleagues** examine Instagram as an external enabler of social media entrepreneurship, adopting a process-oriented lens to explore how and when enabling mechanisms are activated by social media entrepreneurs through their use of Instagram, and how and when detrimental effects of entrepreneurial activity on Instagram relate to these enabling mechanisms. Drawing on 15 case studies, the authors show that many entrepreneurial ventures arise unintentionally and serendipitously, questioning prevailing assumptions about deliberate opportunity identification. They offer a valuable extension of the external enabler framework for social media entrepreneurship, showing that compression and conservation mechanisms were subdued or absent in the data, while expansion and combination mechanisms were prevalent, and introducing two new enabling mechanisms, market engagement and resource collaboration, which influence how entrepreneurs develop products, mobilise resources, and interact with audiences. The context of social media entrepreneurship offers specific forms of enhanced outcome including core marketing, brand partnerships, and commissions. Yet these same mechanisms also intensify emotional demands, relational pressures, integrity concerns, and anxieties over losing control of the venture, in particular as a consequence of a change in the algorithm or user policy by the hosting platform. By uncovering these tensions, the article extends the external enabler framework and highlights the inseparability of Instagram's enabling forces from the dark side of social media entrepreneurship. It thus offers a process-oriented contribution to this Special Issue by illustrating how the very mechanisms that support entrepreneurial success can also generate detrimental consequences. We draw particular attention to a finding that challenges a foundational assumption of entrepreneurship research: many of the social media entrepreneurs studied were already entrepreneurs offline (artists, photographers, humourists) whose activity on Instagram emerged alongside, rather than in place of, their existing ventures. This insight challenges the role of entrepreneurial intention as a necessary precursor to entrepreneurial behaviour in digital contexts. Furthermore, the extended external enabler framework provides a valuable lens through which educators can understand both the enabling and the detrimental dimensions of social media entrepreneurship. Carter and colleagues demonstrate that what makes Instagram enabling is precisely what makes it precarious: entrepreneurial agency is real, but it is co-constructed with a platform that can shift its mechanisms without warning. This raises the question of what ecosystem conditions can sustain start-up digitalisation, and how far their reach extends.

Fabricia Rosa and colleagues contribute to this Special Issue by examining the drivers of start-up digitalisation and their effects on economic, innovative, and social performance. Integrating the Digital Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (DEE) framework with institutional perspectives on ecosystems, the authors employ structural equation modelling to test their hypotheses using data from 206 Brazilian start-ups. Their findings show that DEE dimensions, namely resources, institutions, and infrastructures, significantly enhance the digitalisation of products, services, and internal processes, although the relevance of these effects may vary across contexts. The article also extends entrepreneurial orientation concept by revealing its mediating role: innovation, proactivity, and risk-taking strengthen the influence of ecosystem factors on the adoption of digital technologies, and as digital tools are adopted and entrepreneurial orientation internalised, positive effects can also be observed in the social domain. Overall, this article enriches current debates by framing digitalisation not merely as a technological upgrade, but as an outcome shaped by the dynamic interaction between ecosystem conditions and entrepreneurial behaviour. An unexpected aspect of this paper is the non-significant relationship between DEE dimensions and social performance. At a time when sustainability and stakeholder engagement are increasingly embedded in digital businesses as drivers of societal transition (Randerson and Estrada-Robles, 2023), this finding is surprising

and warrants further attention. An additional noteworthy finding is that start-ups operated by older managers achieve, on average, higher social performance. Rosa and colleagues show that ecosystem resources, institutions, and infrastructures reliably support the digitalisation of start-ups, and that entrepreneurial orientation amplifies this effect. Yet the model, by design, captures structural configurations rather than the lived experience of operating within platform-dependent ventures. Pergelova and colleagues build on this by revealing what that lived experience actually looks like for a specific and rapidly growing class of digital entrepreneurs: influencer-entrepreneurs whose economic performance is directly tied to their online identity, and for whom the platform does not merely enable their venture but continuously co-authors who they are.

Albena Pergelova and colleagues examine the processes through which influencer-entrepreneurs (re)construct and reposition their identities during periods of social controversy. Drawing on longitudinal research that combines five years of netnographic observation with in-depth interviews, the authors identify key strategies used to navigate these tensions, including implicit and explicit identity negotiation, image management, and efforts to reposition themselves within evolving socio-digital landscapes. The richness of the longitudinal data allows us to follow influencer-entrepreneurs through moments of vulnerability, self-doubt, and inflection, tracking the perpetual tension between their internal identity and values and their online identity and its monetisation. This article contributes to the Special Issue by illuminating the complexities, vulnerabilities, and ongoing negotiations that characterise identity construction in digital spaces. A noteworthy finding is that influencer-entrepreneurs who, following an inflection point, choose to reconstruct their online identities in a more creative or pro-social direction, following a re-alignment of their internal identity triggered by a social crisis or controversy. This finding speaks to the possibility of genuine identity transformation in digital entrepreneurship, rather than mere strategic repositioning. Pergelova and colleagues also reveal that managing the gap between internal identity and public perception is not an occasional challenge but a continuous labour, one that becomes acute when social controversy forces an active choice about who to be. In the following article, Polshinskaya and colleagues show that for women digital entrepreneurs, this gap is not necessarily triggered by a public crisis but is structurally produced before the first investor interaction: anticipated bias operates as a pre-emptive filter that shapes how women interpret and respond to the digital entrepreneurial ecosystem long before they have experienced it directly.

Masha Polshinskaya and colleagues investigate how women digital entrepreneurs navigate both the anticipation and the lived experience of gender bias within venture capital and digital entrepreneurship ecosystems. Rather than focusing solely on discriminatory practices by evaluators, the authors introduce the construct of anticipated bias: a cognitive filter shaped by media narratives, peer stories, and academic discourse that leads women to expect unequal treatment before it even occurs. Drawing on 31 in-depth interviews with women digital entrepreneurs in Australia, the article shows how anticipated and experienced bias mutually reinforce one another, forming a self-confirming cycle that shapes how women interpret interactions with investors and ecosystem actors and ultimately influences their strategic decisions. Applying stigma consciousness theory, the authors argue that women's lower engagement with venture capital reflects a pragmatic response to systemic constraints rather than an ambition deficit. Their insights challenge overly optimistic narratives that frame digitalisation as automatically levelling the playing field, and in doing so expose how male-normed expectations, entrenched assumptions, and subtle practices of othering continue to position women as outsiders in digital entrepreneurial spaces. A notable finding is that

anticipated bias is not simply a personal disposition. It is collectively transmitted through media narratives, academic discourse, and peer-shared stories, making it a socially produced filter rather than an individual psychological response. This collective dimension shapes behaviour in striking ways: some women digital entrepreneurs choose not to pitch for funding, or refuse already-granted funding, as a way of shielding themselves from the bias loop. While bootstrapping allows entrepreneurs to maintain control over the venture, it is not without consequences for venture survival and growth. By theorising lower venture capital uptake as a rational strategic response rather than an ambition deficit, Polshinskaya and colleagues reveal that control over the venture's resource base can itself become a form of resistance to systemic constraint. But resource decisions do not exhaust the challenge of control in digital entrepreneurial spaces. As Imiren and colleagues show, for women digital entrepreneurs in Nigeria, legitimacy cannot be built within the digital context alone: it must be constructed simultaneously across overlapping digital, social, and institutional registers that are paradoxical by design.

Efe Imiren and colleagues examine how women digital entrepreneurs in Nigeria build legitimacy while navigating the co-presence of social and digital contexts, drawing on qualitative analysis of 21 in-depth interviews. Far from reducing gendered structural barriers, the digital context intersects with the social context to produce paradoxical tensions and persistent constraints. Through the omnibus approach to context (Welter, 2011), the article shows how digital, institutional, and social contexts are intertwined and overlapping, producing multiple persistent tensions that cannot be resolved but must only be navigated. It extends cyberfeminist scholarship by applying Paradox Theory to reframe the experience of women digital entrepreneurs as inherently paradoxical, shaped by contradictions that coexist simultaneously across these overlapping contexts. In doing so, it illuminates the under-examined dimension of legitimacy building, revealing the varied forms of eclectic legitimisation work and the distinct sets of responses employed by women digital entrepreneurs. This article is particularly insightful in showing how this can play out in practice: some women digital entrepreneurs send a man to a meeting on their behalf, an act that is detrimental to their individual legitimacy yet beneficial to that of the venture. The article closes this Special Issue by exposing the shadowed and often overlooked burdens (i.e. emotional labour) associated with navigating legitimacy in digital spaces, revealing how digital entrepreneurship can reproduce and, in some conditions, intensify the structural and social barriers that entrepreneurs face.

Discussion: Intersections of Enablement and Exposure in Digital Entrepreneurship

Although the articles engage with different empirical settings, they collectively reveal how the forces that enable digital entrepreneurship are inseparable from the vulnerabilities, pressures, and contradictions that accompany it. The following three themes synthesise these insights, moving from the conditions that shape digital entrepreneurship, through the identity and relational work it demands, to the paradoxical entanglement of enablement and precarity that run through all five contributions.

1. Ecosystems and Platforms as Shapers of Entrepreneurial Conditions and Dependencies

Across the articles, entrepreneurship emerges as deeply shaped by the ecosystems, platforms, and infrastructural environments within which it unfolds, consistent with recent calls to theorise entrepreneurship through context rather than through an exclusively agent-centric lens (Ben-Hafaïedh et al., 2024b). The opportunities available to digital entrepreneurs such as opportunity recognition, resource access, identity visibility, and market engagement, are not

determined by individual agency alone but are shaped by the conditions that digital ecosystems and platforms enable, reward, or constrain (Srinivasan and Venkatraman, 2018). Rather than serving as neutral backdrops to entrepreneurial action, these infrastructures co-produce the conditions under which ventures emerge, develop, and are sustained, governing what resources can be mobilised, what audiences can be reached, and on what terms entrepreneurial activity is recognised and rewarded (Nambisan, 2017; Autio et al., 2018). Crucially, this co-production generates dependencies that the entrepreneur cannot simply choose to exit. Platform rules, algorithmic logics, and ecosystem structures set the terms of participation and can be revised without the entrepreneur's consent, exposing ventures to structural risks that are not incidental but inherent to digitally mediated entrepreneurship (Cutolo and Kenney, 2021). Taken together, these insights invite entrepreneurship scholarship to move beyond agent-centric frameworks and attend to the structuring power of digital infrastructures, including both the conditions they make possible and the vulnerabilities they impose (Ben-Hafaïedh et al., 2024a; Ben-Hafaïedh et al., 2024b).

2. Digitalisation as a Transformative Process Involving Identity and Relational Negotiation

Beyond reshaping how ventures are built or how markets are accessed, digitalisation transforms how entrepreneurs construct and sustain their sense of self and their standing in relation to others. In digital contexts, entrepreneurial identity is not simply expressed through the venture but is continuously produced through the interaction between the entrepreneur's internal values, the expectations of public audiences, and the logics of the platforms on which visibility and legitimacy depend (McAdam and Fenlon, 2026). This resonates with the understanding of entrepreneurial identity as a socially negotiated, ongoing accomplishment rather than a fixed property (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021), but extends it. In digital contexts such negotiation is never fully private, it is performed before audiences, shaped by platform dynamics, and conducted simultaneously across overlapping social, institutional, and digital registers. The demands this places on entrepreneurs are not occasional or crisis-driven but structural: identity and legitimacy must be constructed and maintained across these overlapping registers under conditions of social controversy, gender bias, and persistent tensions that cannot be resolved but must be navigated (Kelly and McAdam, 2025). These demands are distributed unevenly, falling disproportionately on those whose identities are already marked as different from prevailing norms, and in doing so reproducing and in some conditions intensifying the inequalities that digitalisation was assumed to dissolve (Martinez Dy et al., 2017).

3. Enablement and Precarity as Two Sides of the Same Digital Coin

Digital entrepreneurs are typically portrayed in an overwhelmingly positive light, suggesting that self-improvement, reinvention, and personal fulfilment are attainable through sustained effort. However, such optimistic representations tend to obscure the tensions and contradictions inherent in operating in digital contexts (Kelly and McAdam, 2025). The emotional and relational demands, integrity pressures, and fears of losing control to platform algorithms or ecosystem constraints that surface across the contributions are not incidental to digital entrepreneurial activity but structurally produced by it: the same forces that enable market access, resource mobilisation, and identity visibility simultaneously generate instability, dependency, and strain (Nambisan and Baron, 2021; Cutolo and Kenney, 2021). This entanglement operates across levels, from the mechanisms through which individual platforms enable and constrain, to the ecosystem norms that promise opportunity while reproducing structural exclusion. Enablement and precarity are, in this sense, two sides of the same digital

coin rather than separable dimensions that can be managed through entrepreneurial skill or resilience.

Future Research: Questions and Agenda

While the contributions in this special issue provide important insights into the tensions and contradictions shaping contemporary digital entrepreneurship, significant gaps in existing scholarship remain. These include, among others, questions of platform governance, entrepreneurial identity, psychosocial wellbeing, ethical responsibility, digital inequality, and the broader societal consequences of digitally mediated entrepreneurial activity, all of which warrant further theoretical and empirical attention. Table 2 outlines a future research agenda organised around seven interrelated dimensions, foregrounding questions that current frameworks have yet to adequately address.

Insert Table 2 about here

Taken together, these research directions point toward the need for a more critical, contextualised, and societally attentive understanding of digital entrepreneurship. As entrepreneurial activity becomes increasingly embedded within platform ecosystems and algorithmically mediated environments, future research must move beyond predominantly celebratory accounts of digitalisation and develop frameworks capable of addressing the vulnerabilities, asymmetries, and unintended consequences that increasingly accompany digitally enabled entrepreneurial activity.

Conclusion

This Special Issue advances a more critical and nuanced understanding of digital entrepreneurship by demonstrating that digitalisation, while generative of opportunity, simultaneously produces constraints, asymmetries, and unintended consequences that existing scholarship has only begun to address. The five contributions collectively reveal that the darker dimensions of digital entrepreneurship are not peripheral or exceptional but structurally embedded in the very conditions that enable digital venturing, with significant human and societal costs that the field can no longer overlook. As digital technologies continue to evolve, we hope this Special Issue will serve as a foundation for the critical, contextualised, and empirically grounded inquiry that this landscape demands. Finally, the insights emerging from this Special Issue also offer valuable contributions to mainstream entrepreneurship research, challenging conventional assumptions and enriching existing theoretical frameworks by foregrounding the role of platform dependency, emotional labour, structural inequality, and ethical responsibility as constitutive dimensions of entrepreneurial activity.

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Table 1: Key Features of Articles in the Special Issue

Title	Authors	Geographical Setting	Methods/ Sample	Theoretical Framework	Key Insights
Instagram as an External Enabler: Exploring the roles and mechanisms that shape - and challenge - social media entrepreneurship Theme 3	Chris Carter, Hannah Noke and Kadja Manninen	UK and Finland	Netnography - immersion (Cross sectional case studies) Instagram users / social media entrepreneurs	External Enabler framework	Extends the external enabler framework for social media entrepreneurship by introducing two new enabling mechanisms (market engagement and resource collaboration) and shows how the same mechanisms that support entrepreneurial success also generate detrimental consequences. <i>Guest Editors' highlight:</i> Many of the social media entrepreneurs studied were already entrepreneurs offline (artists, photographers, humourists), challenging entrepreneurial intention as a necessary precursor to entrepreneurial behaviour in digital contexts.
Digital entrepreneurial ecosystems: Revealing the drivers and implications of digitalisation for start-ups Theme 1	Fabricia Rosa, Lorenzo Compagnucci, Francesa Spigarelli, Januario Monteiro and Rogerio Lunkes	Brazil	Quantitative (PLS-SEM) Digital start-ups	Digital Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (DEE) Institutional theory Entrepreneurial Orientation	DEE dimensions (resources, institutions, and infrastructures) strengthen start-up digitalisation, and entrepreneurial orientation mediates the relationship between ecosystem factors and digital technology adoption across economic, innovative, and social performance dimensions. <i>Guest Editors' highlight:</i> The non-significant direct relationship between DEE dimensions and social performance, and the finding that start-

					ups operated by older managers achieve, on average, higher social performance.
@influenceridentity: Examining Influencer-Entrepreneurs' Identity (Re)construction in Times of Social Controversy Themes 2 and 1	Albena Pergelova, Alysha Hachey and Nataly Levesque	Canada & USA	Netnography (longitudinal) influencer-entrepreneurs	Identity work	Identifies key strategies used by influencer-entrepreneurs to navigate identity tensions during periods of social controversy, including implicit and explicit identity negotiation, image management, and efforts to reposition themselves within evolving socio-digital landscapes. <i>Guest Editors' highlight:</i> Some influencer-entrepreneurs, following an inflection point triggered by a social crisis or controversy, choose to re-align their internal identity and reconstruct their online persona in a more creative or pro-social direction.
Girls Just Wanna Have Funds: How women digital entrepreneurs navigate anticipated and experienced gender bias Theme 3	Masha Polshinskaya, Daniel Schepis and Sharon Purchase	Australia	Qualitative In depth interviews Women digital entrepreneurs	Stigma consciousness theory	Anticipated and experienced bias interact recursively, forming a self-confirming cycle that shapes entrepreneurial behaviour. Lower venture capital uptake is theorised as a strategic response to systemic constraints rather than an ambition deficit. <i>Guest Editors' highlight:</i> Anticipated bias is not simply a personal disposition but is collectively transmitted through

					media narratives, academic discourse, and peer-shared stories. This has a noticeable impact effect on behaviour in that some women choose not to pitch for, or refuse already-granted funding, as a way of shielding themselves from the bias loop, with consequences for venture survival and growth.
Navigating overlapping contexts through eclectic legitimization work: the lived experience of women digital entrepreneurs in Nigeria Theme 2	Efe Imiren, Katerina Nicolopoulou, Paul Lassalle and Samuel Mwaura	Nigeria	Qualitative In depth interviews Women digital entrepreneurs	Paradox theory Legitimacy theory	Conceptualises eclectic legitimization work as the multifaceted practices women digital entrepreneurs adopt in response to the complex constraints and tensions arising from overlapping digital, institutional, and social contexts. These paradoxical tensions must be navigated rather than resolved. <i>Guest Editors' highlight:</i> An illustrative example of this dynamic in practice is that some women digital entrepreneurs send a man to a meeting on their behalf, an act that is detrimental to their individual legitimacy yet beneficial to that of the venture.

Table 2: Future Research Agenda on the Darker Dimensions of Digital Entrepreneurship

Research Area	Core Tensions and Conceptual Gaps	Indicative Research Questions
Platform Dependency and Control	Digital entrepreneurship increasingly unfolds within privately governed platform ecosystems in which entrepreneurs rely on infrastructures, algorithms, monetisation systems, and governance arrangements they	Under what conditions do digital platforms enable entrepreneurship rather than structurally subordinating entrepreneurs to platform interests?

	neither control nor fully understand (Cutolo and Kenney, 2021). Platform owners can unilaterally alter rules, visibility, and access conditions, thereby redistributing uncertainty and risk onto entrepreneurs while consolidating infrastructural power. Existing entrepreneurship theory insufficiently conceptualises dependency and platform governance as constitutive conditions of entrepreneurial activity rather than external environmental factors (Nambisan, 2017; Autio et al., 2018). As such digital entrepreneurial ecosystems (DEEs) may support economic and innovation performance but do not automatically generate social value, raising important questions about whose interests ecosystem design ultimately serves.	How do algorithmic visibility systems shape entrepreneurial strategy, legitimacy, and survival? What governance mechanisms could reduce asymmetrical dependencies between platform owners and digital entrepreneurs?
Ethical Dilemmas and Digital Responsibility	Digital entrepreneurship frequently relies on the extraction, processing, and monetisation of user data and attention (Kraus et al., 2018). Yet entrepreneurship scholarship has paid limited attention to the ethical implications of surveillance-based business models, opaque algorithmic systems, and manipulative engagement architectures. The responsibilities of digital entrepreneurs toward users whose participation, data, and attention sustain their ventures remain largely unaddressed in entrepreneurship scholarship.	How do digital entrepreneurs navigate tensions between growth imperatives and user privacy, autonomy, and wellbeing? To what extent do digital entrepreneurs recognise ethical responsibility toward users whose data and attention sustain their ventures? How do platform incentives normalise manipulative engagement practices or attention extraction? What governance arrangements or entrepreneurial practices could reduce harms associated with surveillance-based entrepreneurial models?
Entrepreneurial Labour, Precarity, and Wellbeing	Although digital entrepreneurship is frequently associated with flexibility and autonomy, it simultaneously intensifies precarity through unstable monetisation systems, blurred work-life boundaries, reputational volatility, and exposure to	To what extent is digital entrepreneurial labour increasingly characterised by emotional and relational demands rather than primarily technological capabilities?

	harassment (Kelly and McAdam, 2023). Entrepreneurs whose ventures are inseparable from their personal identities face particular exposure to these costs, generating hidden forms of labour, including emotional regulation and dual role performance, that have received insufficient theoretical attention. The psychosocial consequences of digital entrepreneurship remain insufficiently understood, particularly regarding long-term mental health effects and the broader impacts on households and communities.	Under what conditions does digital entrepreneurship generate sustainable autonomy rather than chronic precarity? How does exposure to public scrutiny, harassment, and reputational volatility shape entrepreneurial trajectories and strategic choices?
Digital Divide and Social Inequality	Narratives framing digital entrepreneurship as democratising opportunity often obscure how digital environments reproduce or amplify structural inequalities (Martinez Dy et al., 2017). Algorithmic visibility systems, infrastructural disparities, cultural capital requirements, and platform norms may systematically advantage some groups while marginalising others. Exclusion can occur indirectly through anticipatory self-limitation, strategic invisibility, and cumulative exposure to bias before overt discrimination takes place. These dynamics remain inadequately conceptualised across diverse institutional and geographic contexts, and frameworks developed primarily in Western settings may inadequately capture the specific forms of exclusion and adaptation that characterise digital entrepreneurship elsewhere.	Under what conditions does digital entrepreneurship democratise opportunity rather than reinforce structural inequalities? How do gender, race, class, geography, and institutional context shape participation in and outcomes from digital entrepreneurship? How do marginalised entrepreneurs adapt strategically to anticipated exclusion or platform invisibility? What can digital entrepreneurship in the Global South reveal about the limitations of frameworks developed primarily in Western contexts?
Social Media Entrepreneurship	Social media platforms have generated a distinctive and theoretically underexplored form of entrepreneurship in which personal identity, lifestyle, and audience attention function as the primary economic assets (Stephens and Miller, 2024). This configuration creates tensions that differ fundamentally from those encountered in conventional ventures: entrepreneurs must sustain commercially viable forms of authenticity while continuously adapting to platform	How does continuous algorithmic evaluation reshape entrepreneurial identity and self-presentation over time? At what point does audience co-construction of entrepreneurial identity displace entrepreneurs' own sense of self?

	logics, audience expectations, and algorithmic evaluation (McAdam and Fenlon, 2026). The boundaries between self and venture, between authentic expression and commercial performance, are structurally dissolved rather than merely blurred. These dynamics are further complicated by the serendipitous and often unintentional origins of many social media ventures, which challenge established assumptions about entrepreneurial intention, and by the co-constructive role of audiences in shaping entrepreneurial identity over time.	What are the long-term consequences for wellbeing and venture sustainability of subordinating authentic self-expression to the imperatives of the attention economy? How do the serendipitous origins of many social media ventures challenge established assumptions about entrepreneurial intention?
Artificial Intelligence	Generative AI platforms accelerate digital venture creation and scaling by democratising access to frontier capabilities yet (Lévesque et al., 2022) simultaneously generate capability-dependent relationships that expose entrepreneurs to governance shocks, trust erosion, and choice removal. AI-mediated entrepreneurship raises unresolved questions concerning expertise, authenticity, and legitimacy. As entrepreneurial outputs increasingly become machine-assisted, entrepreneurs may lose control over both the production process and the conditions under which entrepreneurial legitimacy is evaluated.	How does generative AI reshape entrepreneurial expertise, creativity, and legitimacy? What new forms of dependency and vulnerability emerge through reliance on AI infrastructures? How do entrepreneurs sustain trust and authenticity when entrepreneurial outputs are increasingly machine-assisted?
Societal Impact and Alternative Futures	Digital entrepreneurship research remains predominantly growth-oriented and present-focused, often neglecting the long-term societal consequences of entrepreneurial activity and the competing visions of desirable digital futures embedded within entrepreneurial ecosystems (Vögele, 2026; Spanjol et al., 2023). Entrepreneurs, educators, policymakers, and platform actors operate through implicit assumptions regarding progress, innovation, and value creation, yet the broader social implications of these assumptions remain underexplored.	How do digital entrepreneurs imagine and contribute to desirable or undesirable societal futures? Under what conditions can digital entrepreneurship contribute to social value rather than primarily shareholder or platform value?

		How might futures literacy reshape entrepreneurial decision-making, responsibility, and education? Which future imaginaries dominate digital entrepreneurial ecosystems and whose interests do they ultimately serve?
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