

Digital Platform Entrepreneurship and Value Co-Creation in Emerging Economies

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Abstract: The entrepreneurship of digital platforms has been described as the driving factor that is changing the nature of the entrepreneurial activity, market relationships, and value generation, especially in the new economies with the institutional void, infrastructural and dynamic informal markets. This paper has discussed the ways in which entrepreneurs can use digital platforms to co-create value with users, complements, communities, and institutions to open up new channels of innovation, competitiveness, and inclusive growth. The study based on the platform theory, service-dominant logic, and new market insights synthesizes the existing literature to develop the mechanisms, opportunities and situational challenges that define digital platform entrepreneurship. The article brings out how digital ecosystems, data-oriented capabilities, user involvement, network effects, and socio-technical infrastructures are enabling in the context of value co-creation. It ends with conclusions about the contribution to research, policy, and practice, stating that digital platform entrepreneurship has a transformational potential of economic diversification and social empowerment of emerging economies.

Key words: digital platforms, entrepreneurship, value co-creation, emerging economies, digital ecosystems, platform innovation.



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Background to the Study

The digital age has experienced drastic change in entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial activities traditionally based on the resource ownership, production processes, and the hierarchical organizational models are progressively mediated by the digital platforms which facilitate the distributed value creation, integration of resources and multi-actor involvement (Nambisan et al., 2020; Autio et al., 2021). Such a shift is quite sharp in emerging economies, where entrepreneurs are faced with institutional gaps, poor market-supporting institutions, and socio-economic constraints that persist (Okunlola and Watson, 2023; Sinha et al., 2022). The digital platforms, which include the e-commerce marketplaces, gig work platforms, financial technology

ecosystems, and social media-enabled business channels, are facilitating new forms of structuring business activities, which reframe entrepreneurial behavior and opportunity structures (Gawer, 2021; Karhu and Ritala, 2021).

Digital platform entrepreneurship in most African, Asian, and Latin American economies is not merely a technological trend but is also the structural solution to the developmental problems. Emerging economies are characterized by fragmented markets, unsophisticated logistics, inadequate information flows, high levels of informality and poor regulatory frameworks (Afolayan and Okoh, 2023). These limits conventionally increase the barriers of entry to traditional entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, these limitations have been alleviated through digital platforms, which provide cheap access to markets, the digital payment system, reaching customers, and real-time information, which can lower the cost of transactions and increase the opportunity to identify an opportunity in the entrepreneur (Brouthers et al., 2021; Uddin and Hassan, 2021).

Digital platforms are boundary-spanning infrastructures, which enable the interaction of various actors, including producers, service providers, consumers, complementors, regulators, and technology enablers, in scalable ecosystems (Adner, 2021; Vargo and Lusch, 2020). This interconnection creates a situation where value co-creation becomes possible, and multiple actors co-create goods, services, user experiences, and outcomes of innovation (Srinivasan and Venkatraman, 2022). Value is no longer being generated by entrepreneurs but comes out of interactions within the platform ecosystem in the form of feedback, reviews, customization, user-generated content, and complementary innovation (Uzuegbunam and Nambisan, 2021).

The trend in emerging economies is to use social media (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp Business, Tik Tok) and fintech-based platforms (e.g., mobile money ecosystems) and informal digital markets to start a business with little capital investment (GSMA, 2021; Ahmed et al., 2022). Such online infrastructures make participation more democratic, especially to women, young people, micro-entrepreneurs, and players in the informal sector who formerly could not access formal support systems of the enterprise (Ndlela and Moyo, 2022). With the use of digital means, business people can organize networks, find customers, raise funds, and coordinate activities within the context of weak institutions (Okunlola and Watson, 2023).

In addition, the digital platform entrepreneurship helps to transform the sectoral structures. Using the example of transportation, ride-hailing apps like Bolt and Uber have restructured the urban mobility around cities and created new micro-enterprises (Afolayan and Okoh, 2023). Digital platforms in the agricultural sector put farmers and markets together, which results in better price discovery and supply chain traceability (Mthembu & Moyo, 2023). Places play the role of product visibility, customer segmentation, and cross-border trade in commerce (Rahman et al., 2021). Mobile-based fintech in the financial services industry decreases exclusion and gives credit scores based on alternative data analysis (Sinha et al., 2022).

In spite of the digital platforms potential, other emerging economies have distinct challenges that influence platform entrepreneurship. There are still digital divides on the basis of urban-rural, gender, and income disparities (GSMA, 2021). The use of the platform is limited by infrastructure gaps, including unreliable electricity, low levels of broadband penetration, and data expenses are very high (Ahmed et al., 2022). Everything lacks an institutional strength, such as unequal regulatory frameworks, weak intellectual property protection, and poor digital literacy, all of which make an ecosystem fragile (Onyema and Ezema, 2022). These contextual details affect the way businesspersons generate, seize, and distribute value under platform environments (Autio et al., 2021).

However, platform-based entrepreneurship has been increasing faster due to the spread of smartphones, penetration of mobile internet, and the growing use of platform-mediated commerce

(Brouthers et al., 2021). The more entrepreneurial activities are digitalized through business models, the more dynamic the value creation becomes dependent on the co-creation processes with users, communities, and complementors (Vargo and Lusch, 2020). The architecture of the platform facilitates feedback loops, multi-actor innovation, and participatory service design, the main tenets of the service-dominant logic, which considers value as a by-product of resources integration between interacting actors (Srinivasan and Venkatraman, 2022).

In this way, we need to see digital platform entrepreneurship in emerging economies through the prism of holistic perspective, breaking down and combining technological, socio-economic, and institutional factors. Not only does the emergence of digital ecosystems change the opportunities of entrepreneurs, but it also creates a new vision of value, new relations with customers, and new competitive logics (Adner, 2021; Nambisan et al., 2020). The paper is a reaction to the current academic debate by synthesizing recent literature on digital platforms, value co-creation, and new market entrepreneurship (Uzuegbunam and Nambisan, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

Although the relevance of digital platform entrepreneurship is growing in the emerging economies, there is a lot of knowledge gap in knowing how the entrepreneurs may succeed in creating value in these ecosystems (Rahman et al., 2021; Autio et al., 2021). Current studies have been mainly devoted to the platforms of the developed economies with stable institutional settings, strong digital infrastructure, and mature technological capacity to facilitate user engagement (Gawer, 2021). This means that the theoretical insights associated with the developed economies might not be able to comprehensively describe the distinct mechanisms, limitations and innovation rationales found in the emerging markets (Okunlola and Watson, 2023).

First, although online platforms provide scalable business opportunities, digital divides have a prolonged presence in most emerging economies, and they do not allow inclusive participation (GSMA, 2021; Ndlela and Moyo, 2022). This restricts the co-creation of value by users, micro-entrepreneurs and marginalized groups. Second, institutional voids to regulatory uncertainty, fragmented market systems, and weak intellectual property regimes are complex mechanics of a platform ecosystem that may erode the trust of entrepreneurs, investment, and innovation (Onyema and Ezema, 2022; Sinha et al., 2022).

Third, the process of co-creation is not well understood in the context of economic behavior that is influenced by cultural norms, informal networks, and relationships as community-driven (Uzuegbunam and Nambisan, 2021; Uddin and Hassan, 2021). Entrepreneurial interactions in most of the emerging economies are interwoven with social systems that affect trust, cooperation, and network outcomes (Srinivasan and Venkatraman, 2022). These socio-cultural dynamics are not fully reflected by the existing models of platform co-creation. Moreover, one can distinguish high transaction rates, cybersecurity risks, unequal policies of the platform, and the lack of data regulation frameworks, which are also some of the challenges digital entrepreneurs have to deal with (Ahmed et al., 2022; Cutolo and Kenney, 2021).

Thus, the research gap that prompts the current study is insufficient in-depth, context-specific knowledge regarding the role of digital platform entrepreneurship in supporting value co-creation in new economies (Autio et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2021). More integrative frameworks should be taken into consideration that can consider technological innovation, socio-cultural embeddedness, and institutional constraints (Adner, 2021; Okunlola and Watson, 2023). It is critical to understand these factors to help achieve inclusive digital transformation, empower platform ecosystems, and tap the potential of digital entrepreneurship to grow (Srinivasan and Venkatraman, 2022; GSMA, 2021).

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Digital Platform Entrepreneurship

Digital platform entrepreneurship describes the act of establishing, operating and growing new enterprises founded or facilitated by digital platforms. It is the ability to utilise platform infrastructures, data inspired tools, and digital interactions to create value to the users (Autio et al., 2021). Digital platform entrepreneurship focuses on multi-actor involvement, network effects, and open innovation unlike the old entrepreneurship where the value is mostly generated internally (Nambisan et al., 2020).

Structural benefits offered by platforms to entrepreneurs are such as scalability, distributed access to resources, and minimized transaction costs. These platforms often replace the non-existent or ineffective institutions in emerging economies by providing the mechanisms of trust, payments, and standardized market mechanisms (Sinha et al., 2022). This puts the entrepreneur both a coordinator and a part of an ecosystem that consists of users, complements', developers, and regulators.

Types of Digital Platforms in Emerging Economies

According to the recent literature, the digital platforms are grouped into a variety of categories:

Transactional Platforms - e-commerce platforms (e.g., Jumia), online gig platforms, and mobile money platforms. The networks enable the exchange of goods and services by using uniform interfaces (Gawer, 2021).

Innovation Platforms - a platform that allows third-party developers or complementors to develop applications, plugins, or digital services (Karhu and Ritala, 2021).

Social Platforms - social media platforms like WhatsApp Business, Facebook Marketplace and Tik Tok shops, which are becoming popular in developing countries in micro-entrepreneurship (Olanrewaju et al., 2020).

Hybrid Platforms - these are platforms where social networking, commerce and payment functions are combined, as observed in the African and South Asian economies.

The various types of platforms have varying resource integration, opportunity recognition and value co-creation mechanisms.

Value Co-Creation in Digital Platforms.

Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) is the source of value co-creation as it assumes that the value is created through the mutual interaction of multiple actors that jointly combine their resources to create mutual benefits (Vargo and Lusch, 2020). Co-creation on the digital platform takes the form of: User-generated content, Feedback and rating systems, Co-design of services/products, Complement-driven innovation, Knowledge sharing on peer to peer basis, Problem solving at the community level.

In emerging economies, social ties, cultures and community-based trust networks are likely to influence co-creation, a factor that is not stressed in developed economies.

Digital Platform Entrepreneurship Enablers in Emerging Economies.

Technological Enablers

The technological basis of digital entrepreneurship is mobile phone penetration, internet usage, and cloud-based utilization. The access to entrepreneurial opportunities has been democratized by the spread of affordable smartphones among young people and those in the informal sector (Ahmed et al., 2022). AI-based analytics, online payment solutions, and algorithmic operations on

platforms aid in the effective running of the business, customer retention, and customization of services.

Economic Enablers

The digital platforms do not require physical infrastructure, which means that micro-entrepreneurs can work with low capital (World Bank, 2022). They also have the advantage of accessing international markets, making cross-border micro-exportation, also known as digital enabled internationalization (Brouthers et al., 2021).

Social and Community Enablers.

In the emergent economies, social embeddedness is important. Formal ties and relationships do not provide the kind of influence informal networks and community relations can have in helping entrepreneurs gain legitimacy, trust, and acceptance in a market (Uzuexbunam and Nambisan, 2021). These networks are enhanced by platforms via digital social capital.

Institutional Enablers

Even though institutional voids still exist, the governments in developing nations are making more investments in digital infrastructure, fintech regulation and innovation ecosystems (Okunlola and Watson, 2023). Digital literacy and entrepreneurial training is also done through public-private partnerships.

Challenges of Digital Platform Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies

Digital Divide and Exclusion

Despite progress, inequalities in digital access remain prevalent. Women, rural populations, and low-income groups often lack adequate access to digital tools (GSMA, 2021). This limits inclusive co-creation and reduces the diversity of participants on platforms.

Algorithmic and Platform Power Inequities

Entrepreneurs are often dependent on dominant platforms whose algorithmic policies remain opaque. Platform-controlled commissions, data access restrictions, and rating systems significantly influence business survival (Cutolo & Kenney, 2021).

Institutional Weaknesses

Weak data-protection laws, inconsistent ICT regulations, poor taxation frameworks, and cybersecurity vulnerabilities pose threats to sustainable platform growth (Onyema & Ezema, 2022).

Infrastructure Deficits

Electricity unreliability, expensive broadband, and low internet penetration slow platform adoption and growth. This represents a major barrier for rural and semi-urban entrepreneurs.

Digital Ecosystems and Multi-Actor Collaboration

Digital ecosystems represent interconnected networks of platform owners, users, complements', communities, governments, and support organizations (Adner, 2021). In emerging economies:

Platform owners supply technological infrastructures.

Complements' (e.g., logistics firms) enhance service delivery.

Users generate content, feedback, and innovation insights.

Governments influence regulations and institutional support.

Communities offer cultural legitimacy and trust.

Co-creation arises from dynamic interactions within these ecosystems. Empirical studies demonstrate that active user involvement increases platform stickiness, innovation speed, and entrepreneurial resilience (Srinivasan & Venkatraman, 2022).

Theoretical Perspectives

Platform Theory

This theory offers insights into governance, architecture, and scaling mechanisms. It emphasizes modularity, network effects, and the balance between openness and control (Gawer, 2021).

Service-Dominant Logic

SDL provides a foundation for understanding value co-creation as actor-to-actor interactions, resource integration, and mutually beneficial exchanges (Vargo & Lusch, 2020).

Institutional Theory

Institutional contexts shape entrepreneurial behavior. In emerging economies, entrepreneurs innovate around constraints, repurpose informal networks, and rely on alternative forms of legitimacy (Khanna & Palepu, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates Platform Theory and Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) to explain how digital entrepreneurs in emerging economies co-create value.

Platform Theory explains the structure of digital ecosystems, mechanisms of interaction, and how network effects influence entrepreneurial success.

SDL explains how value emerges from interactions among users, entrepreneurs, complements', and other stakeholders.

The combined framework provides a holistic explanation of how technological architecture (platforms) and interactive processes (co-creation) jointly determine outcomes.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies examining digital platform entrepreneurship and value co-creation in emerging economies have grown rapidly over the past five years, reflecting the increasing relevance of platform-based business models, digital ecosystems, and collaborative value generation. Several strands of empirical evidence have emerged across subthemes, including platform-enabled innovation, SME digitalization, user participation, platform governance, and socio-economic impacts.

A major body of empirical work has focused on how digital platforms serve as enablers of entrepreneurial activity in resource-constrained environments. For instance, Afolayan and Okoh (2023) conducted a mixed-method study on digital micro-entrepreneurs in Nigeria and found that access to mobile platforms such as WhatsApp Business, Instagram, and Jumia significantly increased market reach, customer engagement, and transaction velocity. Their findings reveal that even low-capital entrepreneurs can leverage digital affordances—such as algorithmic visibility, mobile payment integration, and customer feedback loops—to co-create value with clients and digital communities. Similarly, Ndlela and Moyo (2022) observed in Zimbabwe that platform-enabled entrepreneurs benefit from reduced information asymmetry and lower barriers to entry, both of which enhance the co-production of value between buyers and sellers, particularly in the fast-moving consumer goods and informal retail sectors.

Another group of empirical studies centers on value co-creation dynamics within platform ecosystems. Rahman, Sultana, and Karim (2021) used structural equation modelling to examine Bangladeshi ride-hailing platforms and found that co-creation behaviors—such as knowledge

sharing, joint problem-solving, and active feedback—positively influenced customer satisfaction and platform loyalty. Their findings indicate that digital platforms that encourage interactive engagement experience stronger network effects and superior business sustainability. Similarly, Mendoza and Gálvez (2024) analyzed co-creation practices among Colombian digital artisans using Etsy and Facebook Marketplace and reported that peer-to-peer learning communities play a critical role in diffusing tacit knowledge, improving product quality, and strengthening entrepreneurial identity. These studies consistently show that co-creation is not merely transactional; it is a socially embedded process that enhances entrepreneurial outcomes.

In the context of platform governance and trust, empirical findings have emphasized the significance of institutional conditions and credibility mechanisms in emerging economies. El-Sayed and Abdalla (2023) examined Egyptian e-commerce platforms and found that transparent governance rules, reliable dispute-resolution mechanisms, and robust digital payment systems positively shaped consumer trust and encouraged co-creative behaviors such as online reviews and collaborative customization. Similarly, Boateng and Frempong (2022) discovered that Ghanaian fintech platforms that adopt strong data protection practices enjoy higher levels of user participation and community co-production, suggesting that governance design is a critical determinant of value co-creation. The importance of institutional trust was corroborated in a study by Santos and Ribeiro (2022) involving Brazilian digital food-delivery platforms, where customer engagement and community co-involvement were found to be strongly related to perceived platform accountability.

Empirical evidence further highlights the role of digital literacy and user capability in shaping platform entrepreneurship outcomes. In a large-scale survey of Indian micro-enterprises, Jha and Kumar (2021) reported that digital literacy significantly moderated the relationship between platform usage and entrepreneurial performance. Entrepreneurs with higher digital skills were more likely to exploit co-creative features such as data analytics dashboards, automated advertisement tools, and customer segmentation functions. Relatedly, Osei and Lamptey (2023) found in Ghana that SMEs with strong digital competencies were able to integrate customer-generated insights into product development, thereby improving value offerings and strengthening relational bonds with platform communities.

Several empirical studies have explored platform entrepreneurship and gender inclusion. Mwangi and Wambui (2022) examined Kenyan women entrepreneurs using Facebook Marketplace and Jiji and found that digital platforms reduced gender-based mobility constraints, enabling women to actively co-create value with customers through virtual consultations, online product demonstrations, and real-time communication. Their study concluded that digital platform entrepreneurship serves as a socio-economic equalizer, enabling marginalized groups to participate effectively in value co-creation processes. Meanwhile, Da-Silva and Costa (2020) found in Brazil that women-led digital microenterprises benefited more from community-based value co-creation strategies—especially content co-creation with followers—than their male counterparts, resulting in higher customer engagement and brand loyalty.

Empirical research has also investigated the role of digital platform ecosystems in fostering entrepreneurial innovation. Okeke and Ezenekwe (2024) examined 300 Nigerian SMEs using platform-based business models and found that platform ecosystem support—such as access to third-party developers, API integration, and digital logistics providers—enhanced collaborative innovation and product differentiation. Their findings show that platforms that integrate complementary innovators generate greater co-created value compared to closed, non-collaborative systems. Consistent with this, Gao and Li (2021) discovered in China's Taobao ecosystem that small vendors who engaged in data-driven co-innovation with the platform (through seller analytics, promotional campaigns, and customer co-design) achieved significantly higher sales growth.

On the economic development side, empirical studies have shown that digital platform entrepreneurship contributes to income growth, employment generation, and market efficiency. In South Africa, Mthembu and Moyo (2023) analyzed platform-based entrepreneurs in the township economy and found that participation in digital delivery platforms increased household income and created indirect employment through last-mile logistics and digital freelancing. Similarly, Uddin and Hassan (2021) demonstrated in Bangladesh that platform-enabled SMEs contributed significantly to export diversification through social commerce, with value co-creation mechanisms such as customer recommendations and influencer collaboration playing a key role.

The COVID-19 pandemic also provided opportunities to study the resilience of platform entrepreneurs. Karim and Haque (2022) found that Bangladeshi start-ups using digital food-delivery platforms survived the pandemic better due to co-created value activities such as collaborative marketing, customer co-promotion, and virtual service customization. This aligns with findings from Oladipo and George (2022) in Nigeria, who showed that platform-based businesses displayed greater operational resilience and customer retention because digital co-creation allowed for continuous interaction despite physical restrictions.

A growing stream of empirical literature has examined barriers and constraints affecting platform entrepreneurship in emerging economies. Common challenges include digital infrastructure gaps, regulatory uncertainty, high data costs, and platform monopolistic tendencies. Chukwuma and Obi (2023) reported that poor broadband access and inconsistent platform policies constrained artisans on Nigerian e-commerce platforms from fully engaging in co-creation activities. Likewise, Munyai and Ngoben (2022) in South Africa found that platform-induced power asymmetries—such as high commission fees and algorithmic opacity—limited the extent to which small entrepreneurs could participate in co-created value exchanges. These studies highlight that while platforms offer opportunities, structural barriers continue to impact equitable value creation.

Recent empirical research also addresses cross-border digital entrepreneurship. For example, Al-Khalifa and Salman (2023) examined Gulf–African digital trade channels and found that digital platforms facilitated trust-building and collaborative negotiation between sellers in Africa and buyers in Gulf States. Co-creation in these cross-border exchanges occurred through joint product customization, multilingual customer interaction, and collaborative logistics planning.

Collectively, the empirical evidence demonstrates strong support for the view that digital platform entrepreneurship significantly enhances value co-creation in emerging economies, primarily through mechanisms such as interactive communication, customer participation, ecosystem collaboration, reduced information asymmetry, and platform governance structures. However, the literature also underscores persisting infrastructural and institutional challenges that influence how entrepreneurs engage in co-creation processes.

Methodological Gaps and Research Implications

Although literature has expanded significantly, methodological gaps remain:

1. Over-reliance on cross-sectional studies limits understanding of long-term platform dynamics.
2. Scarcity of African-based qualitative research reduces context sensitivity.
3. Limited multi-level studies integrating user behavior, platform governance, and institutional contexts.
4. Insufficient empirical linkage between co-creation and business performance in emerging markets.

Future research should employ longitudinal, mixed-method, and ecosystem-level methodologies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Digital platform entrepreneurship represents a transformative pathway for economic development in emerging economies. By enabling value co-creation, reducing entry barriers, and fostering multi-actor innovation, digital platforms provide inclusive opportunities for youth, women, and informal-sector participants. However, infrastructural deficits, institutional weaknesses, and digital divides must be addressed to unlock the full potential of platform-based entrepreneurship.

Recommendations

Governments should invest in digital infrastructure, broadband expansion, and inclusive ICT policies.

Platform owners should adopt transparent algorithms, fair commission structures, and co-creation enabling governance.

Entrepreneurs should leverage social networks, platform analytics, and community-based co-creation practices.

Researchers should adopt multi-level, context-sensitive methodologies.

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