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Article

Platform-Dependent Entrepreneurship: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: Digital platforms have facilitated the emergence of novel entrepreneurial opportunities that rely on a platform for market entry and access to resources. This systematic review synthesizes current knowledge on how platforms impact and shape “platform-dependent entrepreneurship” and how platform-dependent entrepreneurs (PDEs) respond to power asymmetries. The results of the review suggest that platforms lower barriers to entry but also lead to PDEs’ dependence and precarity. Specifically, platform governance significantly impacts PDEs’ behavior by shaping their market access, visibility, and opportunities through various mechanisms. In response, PDEs employ several strategies to preserve their autonomy, such as engaging in multi-homing, capitalizing on branding, and conducting activities outside of the platform. Thus, PDEs’ entrepreneurial identity is co-constructed through the interplay of individual agencies and platform dynamics as they navigate tensions in the platform ecosystem. Based on this review, we present a research agenda for the future that has substantial implications for the theory and application of PDEs in the literature.

Keywords: platform-dependent entrepreneurship; systematic integrative review; power-dependence theory



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1. Introduction

The rise in digital platforms has given birth to a new class of economic actors: platform-dependent entrepreneurs (PDEs). PDEs are defined as individuals who rely on digital platforms to reach customers, generate revenue, and operate their ventures (Cutolo and Kenney 2021). PDEs encompass a wide range of actors, from app developers to content creators on social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. These entrepreneurs are drawn to platforms by the promise of access to vast markets, ready-made infrastructure, and powerful tools for building and scaling their businesses. PDEs’ importance lies in their potential to create new markets, disrupt existing industries, and generate significant economic and social value (Wood and Lehdonvirta 2021; Cutolo and Kenney 2021). Nambisan and Baron (2021) highlight that PDEs serve two simultaneous roles in digital platform ecosystems. On one hand, PDEs operate as independent businesses, pursuing their goals, with the platform acting as an intermediary. On the other hand, from the platform owner’s perspective, PDEs are viewed as complementors, and they are only valued if they contribute to the platform’s overall value.

In recent years, there has been a burgeoning research stream focusing on PDEs (Nambisan and Baron 2021). It has been shown that PDEs face unique challenges, such as managing multi-sided markets, ensuring platform governance, and navigating complex regulatory environments (Huang et al. 2013; Dal Zotto and Omid 2020; Schor et al. 2020). Furthermore, they maintain a paradoxical relationship with the platforms they join. On one hand, the platform provides affordances that reduce barriers to entrepreneurial entry and growth, including access to resources, markets, and supportive infrastructure, such as payment systems (Ghazawneh and Henfridsson 2013). However, PDEs also experience an inherent power asymmetry vis à vis the platform owner, who can unilaterally alter the

ecosystem's design, rules, and policies in self-interested ways that undermine the PDEs (Eaton et al. 2015).

Despite the growing scholarly interest, the current literature remains fragmented and lacks a comprehensive framework to integrate the diverse findings (Nambisan 2017). This problem can be attributed to several factors. First, research on PDEs is an emerging field that spans multiple disciplines, including economics, management, media research and information systems (Gawer 2014; Lall et al. 2023; Ebrahimi et al. 2020; Rietveld and Schilling 2021). Each discipline approaches this topic from a different perspective, employing distinct theoretical lenses and methodologies, leading to a dispersed body of knowledge (Nambisan et al. 2018). Moreover, the rapid evolution of digital platforms and their ecosystems, coupled with the heterogeneity among PDEs, has made it challenging for researchers to keep pace with the changing dynamics and develop an integrative understanding of the phenomenon.

There have been some efforts to review and synthesize the literature on digital entrepreneurship more broadly (Nambisan 2017; Fernandes et al. 2022; Sussan and Acs 2017), where PDE research originally flowed from. However, few systematic reviews focus specifically on PDEs in the literature. Most of these papers focus only on specific aspects of PDE, such as “contentpreneurs” (Johnson et al. 2022) and social media influencers (Zabel 2023). This limits these studies' ability to provide an integrative framework that summarizes and captures the knowledge of PDEs in the literature.

To address this gap, we conducted a systematic review of PDE in the literature, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of PDEs and their relationship with digital platforms. By synthesizing 48 findings from business and management, entrepreneurship, information systems, and media and communication (Agarwal et al. 2023; Zhao 2023; Etemad 2023; Cenamor et al. 2019; Park et al. 2023; Engert et al. 2022; García-Dastugue et al. 2024), we focus on the following research questions: How do platforms impact and shape “platform-dependent entrepreneurship”, and how do PDEs respond to power asymmetries? To answer this question, we identified four themes from the current literature: (1) how platform characteristics impact opportunities and challenges for PDEs, (2) how platform governance impacts PDEs' behavior, (3) what strategies are available to PDEs for managing risks and dependence, and (4) how PDE's entrepreneurial identity is shaped in this struggling process.

This systematic review represents the first comprehensive effort to map and synthesize the emerging field of PDE. These insights may offer a roadmap for future research and theory development. Our review identifies critical gaps and promising directions for future research that can help mature this emerging domain.

In the following section, we discuss the definition and scope of platform-dependent entrepreneurship and outline the methodological approach employed to conduct this review. We then present an overview of the research findings, accompanied by a detailed theme analysis that systematically categorizes and synthesizes the extant literature. The final section concludes the paper, presenting the main results and highlighting the current study's limitations. We also provide recommendations for future research, identifying key areas that warrant further scholarly attention to advance our understanding of this rapidly evolving field.

2. Definitions and Scope

Entrepreneurship in the digital age has attracted substantial scholarly interest. Scholars have theorized how digital technologies alter key entrepreneurship concepts, such as uncertainty (Nambisan 2017) and opportunity creation (Von Briel et al. 2018), in venture creation processes. Specifically, the rise in online platforms that orchestrate economic interactions and innovation has reshaped the entrepreneurial context (Nambisan 2017). Researchers have explored the unique features of digital platforms, such as generativity (Zittrain 2008), technology affordances (Autio et al. 2018), and openness (Nambisan et al. 2018), that enable new entrepreneurial opportunities. Despite the proliferation of scholarly

attempts to define and classify platforms (Gawer 2014; Cusumano et al. 2019; Grabher and König 2020), their essential nature remains elusive.

Platforms defy simple categorization for they selectively combine elements of markets, hierarchies, networks, and communities (Kirchner and Schüßler 2019). Scholars have distinguished between transaction platforms, which facilitate exchanges between buyers and sellers, and innovation platforms, which provide a technological foundation for further platform expansion (Cusumano et al. 2019). However, as the platform economy evolves, this dichotomy fails to capture the dynamics and multifaceted characteristics of platforms. In response, a recent work proposed a groundbreaking perspective that redefined platforms as dynamic relational structures shaped by the interplay among three social forces: mutuality, autonomy, and domination (Schüßler et al. 2021). It showed that mutuality, which encompasses the practices of sharing and reciprocity, autonomy, the desire for freedom and independence, and domination, the exercise of power and control, coexist in platforms in a state of perpetual tension, shaping the form and function of these entities. This relational perspective offers a compelling lens that allows us to focus on the tensions between roles within the platform and how these tensions shape the platform's development and impact on various stakeholders.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of the interplay among various roles in platforms, most researchers have predominantly adopted the platform owner's perspective, investigating how they create value (Parker et al. 2016), design their architectures (Baldwin and Woodard 2009), and cultivate complementary innovators (Boudreau and Jeppesen 2015). Less attention has been devoted to entrepreneurs who populate these platforms' ecosystems and rely on the platform for their entrepreneurial endeavors.

PDE has emerged as a key concept to address this gap because it specifically engages with business activities and value creation through digital platforms. In the early literature, PDEs were sometimes termed "platform complementors" (Huang et al. 2013; Zhu 2019). Platform complementors are third-party businesses or individuals that build complementary products or services on top of an existing platform, thereby extending its functionality and value proposition (Dal Zotto and Omid 2020). Cutolo and Kenney (2021) first define PDEs as entrepreneurship actualized through an online digital platform. Based on the assumption that platforms maintain network effects and winner-takes-most outcomes (Gawer and Cusumano 2002), they focus on the power imbalance between platforms through a power-dependent theoretical lens.

Tschang (2021) provides a valuable complement perspective by highlighting how various platform types and business models can lead to various treatments of PDEs (Table 1). He distinguishes three main platform categories: sharing-economy platforms, cultivator platforms and ecosystems, and community-oriented platforms. Each category presents unique implications for PDEs and the power dynamics in the platform ecosystem.

Sharing-economy platforms are characterized by extensive dependence on PDEs for comprehensive coverage and service. The power dynamics in these platforms can be balanced by the ease of entry and exit for PDEs, which can help prevent the platform from displacing or exploiting individual PDEs. In contrast, cultivator platforms and ecosystems focus on nurturing PDEs to enhance the platform's unique value proposition. These platforms often involve a deep, mutually dependent nature of work and contractual relationships between the platform and PDEs. However, the diversification of revenue sources in the ecosystem may reduce the pressure on PDEs to extract value directly from the platform. Community-oriented platforms rely on PDEs and users to generate content, engagement, and experiences that are central to the platform's identity and competitive advantage. These platforms are generative in nature, and the careful design of platform architecture and rules can create mutual benefits for the platform, PDEs, and other participants. Nurturing a thriving PDE community is essential for these platforms' success because the value co-creation process is integral to the platform's growth and sustainability.

Table 1. Platform types and PDE treatment.

Platform Type	Examples	Characteristics & PDE Treatment
Sharing Economy Platforms	Airbnb, Uber	Highly dependent on PDEs for comprehensive coverage and service <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interdependence disincentivizes displacing or exploiting individual PDEs• Easier entry and exit of PDEs can help balance power
Cultivator Platforms and Ecosystems	Video game consoles	Focus on cultivating selected PDE to enhance the platform’s unique value proposition <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Involved nature of work and depth of contractual relationships acknowledge mutual dependence• Diversification of revenue sources within an ecosystem may reduce pressure to extract value directly from PDEs
Community-Oriented Platforms	Second Life, Minecraft, Lego Ideas	PDEs and users generate content, engagement, and experiences that are central to the platform’s identity and competitive advantage <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nurturing a thriving PDE community is generative for the platform• Careful design of platform architecture and rules can create mutual benefits for the platform, PDEs, and other participants

Adapted from [Tschang \(2021\)](#).

To advance the PDE literature, researchers could explore various types of platforms and their impacts on PDEs; for example, they could distinguish between B2B, B2C, and DTC platforms. By recognizing the diversity of platform models and their strategic implications for PDEs, scholars can build a more detailed understanding of PDEs.

3. Methodology

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology following the principles established by [Tranfield et al. \(2003\)](#) and further developed in recent entrepreneurship reviews (e.g., [Bruneel and De Cock 2016](#); [Dabić et al. 2020](#)). The SLR approach is particularly valuable for synthesizing complex and extensive bodies of research through its protocol-driven nature, ensuring transparency and replicability in the identification and analysis of the relevant literature. This methodological framework guided our rigorous multistep process of literature selection and analysis, which is detailed in the following sections, along with the rationale for key methodological decisions. Table 2 outlines our systematic and comprehensive methodological approach to identifying, analyzing, and selecting the relevant literature on PDE. The following sections elaborate on these methodological procedures and provide detailed justifications for our decisions at each stage of the systematic literature review process.

Table 2. The SLR methodological procedure.

Procedures	Criteria	Rationales
1. Inclusion criteria	(1) The main focus of the publication: the phenomenon of PDE. However, different usages of terminologies were acceptable so long as they conceptually followed entrepreneurial activities fundamentally relying on digital platforms. (2) Quality of papers: peer-reviewed, full-length journal articles (no restriction on journal rankings). (3) Type of publications: empirical, conceptual, review articles, and conference papers. (4) Time frame: 2016 to February 2024.	This step established clear conceptual boundaries while maintaining inclusivity, given the field’s emerging nature and varied terminology. The focus on peer-reviewed works ensured academic rigor.

Table 2. *Cont.*

Procedures	Criteria	Rationales
2. Search method and scope	(1) Primary search terms: “platform dependent entrepreneur/ship”, “platform-based entrepreneur/ship”, “platform complementor”. (2) Databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and EBSCO. (3) Boolean combinations of search terms (Initial hits: 726 documents).	Search terms were selected based on a thorough review of the existing literature to capture relevant terminology in this emerging field. Multiple databases were used to ensure comprehensive coverage.
3. Screening and selection	(1) Removal of duplicates using Endnote X9 (662 articles). (2) Elimination of non-English publications, editorials, book reviews, and short articles (610 articles). (3) Exclusion of irrelevant topics: gig economy focus (344 excluded); platform labor rights (97 excluded); legal aspects (48 excluded); general platform business models (29 excluded). (4) Full-text assessment (92 articles). (5) Google Scholar supplementary search (3 additional articles).	This systematic screening process ensured the final sample focused specifically on PDE, excluding tangentially related topics while maintaining theoretical and empirical rigor.
4. Quality assessment	Evaluation against four criteria: (1) theoretical contribution; (2) methodological rigor; (3) contextual relevance; and (4) substantive findings. (Final sample: 48 articles).	These criteria ensured the selected articles provided meaningful insights into PDE research while maintaining academic quality standards.

3.1. Search Strategy

We initiated our SLR by establishing clear conceptual boundaries. Given that platform-dependent entrepreneurship represents an emerging field characterized by varied terminology and fragmented research, we adopted an inclusive definition to capture relevant studies across different conceptualizations. This approach allowed us to incorporate research examining entrepreneurial activities that fundamentally rely on digital platforms, regardless of the specific terminology employed. To construct our search strategy, we conducted a thorough review of the existing literature to identify commonly used terminology in the field. The resulting search terms included “platform dependent entrepreneur/ship”, “platform-based entrepreneur/ship”, and “platform complementor”, which were then combined using Boolean operators to create comprehensive search strings.

Our literature search encompassed three major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and EBSCO. We selected Scopus as our primary database due to its extensive coverage of scientific publications and particular suitability for investigating emerging research streams, given its broader inclusivity compared to other databases.

3.2. Inclusion Criteria and Screening Procedure

Regarding the inclusion criteria, a publication time frame was established starting from 2016 to February 2024, when the search was carried out, focusing on peer-reviewed works. To facilitate international scholarly dialog, we limited our search to English-language publications. Notably, we did not restrict our search to specific journals or outlets based on rankings, acknowledging that such constraints might unduly limit coverage in this emerging, multidisciplinary field.

Our initial search yielded 726 documents, which were reduced to 662 unique entries after removing duplicates using Endnote X9. The first screening phase eliminated non-English publications, editorials, book reviews, and articles shorter than five pages, resulting in 610 documents. Through the careful examination of titles, abstracts, keywords, and conclusions, we further refined our sample by excluding 344 documents that primarily addressed the gig economy. Subsequently, we removed 97 papers focusing

on platform labor rights and working conditions, 48 articles primarily discussing legal aspects of platform regulation, and 29 articles addressing general platform business models without an entrepreneurship focus. This screening process yielded 92 articles for a comprehensive review.

The full-text assessment of these 92 articles allowed for an evaluation of their theoretical contributions and empirical evidence, excluding those that only tangentially addressed platform-dependent entrepreneurship or broadly discussed digital entrepreneurship without platform dependence. This rigorous evaluation resulted in 45 publications meeting our inclusion criteria. Recognizing the limitations of conventional database searches in emerging research streams, we supplemented our systematic review with a Google Scholar search, which yielded three additional seminal articles from media research that offered valuable insights on PDE in the literature.

The final sample of 48 articles was evaluated against four quality criteria: theoretical contribution, methodological rigor, contextual relevance, and substantive findings. These articles collectively represent the current state of knowledge on PDE in research, encompassing diverse theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches.

4. Findings: Descriptive Analysis and Classification

4.1. Number and Type of Publications and Citation Trends

Figure 1 shows the yearly publication and citation trends of PDE research between 2016 and 2023; our analysis reveals both publication growth and citation patterns. In terms of publication trajectory, most of our sample studies were published from 2020 onwards, with 2023 showing the highest publication output ($n = 13$, 27.1%). The growing number of publications in recent years suggests increasing scholarly interest in PDE research, likely driven by the rapid evolution of digital platforms and their expanding role in entrepreneurial activities.

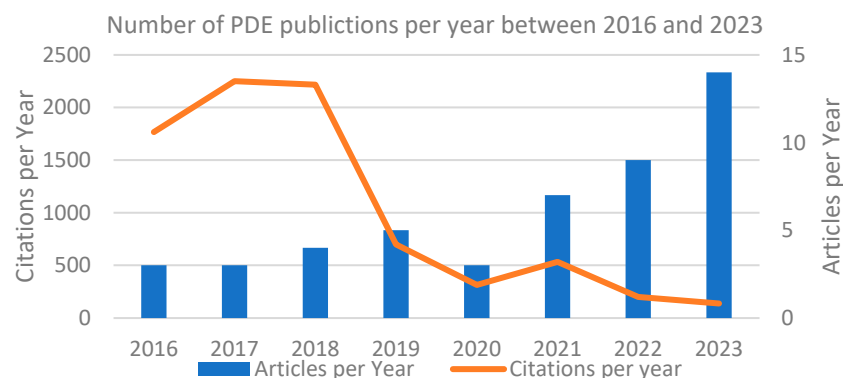


Figure 1. Number of publications and citations per year.

The citation analysis of our sample indicated a cumulative citation count of approximately 7000 from 2016 to 2023. Papers published between 2016 and 2018 garnered the highest citations (averaging around 2000 citations per year). The average citation rate across the period was 875 citations per year. Recent publications from 2021 to 2023 have relatively lower citation counts, which can be expected given their recency, suggesting that PDE research is still an emerging field and may require more time to establish its scholarly influence, particularly when compared to more established domains in digital entrepreneurship research.

4.2. Sample Overview

A detailed classification and analysis of these publications is presented in Table 3, which provides comprehensive insights into the distribution of research fields, authorship patterns, and methodological approaches in PDE research. The final sample was distributed across six main fields: business and management ($n = 21$, 43.8%), information systems

and technology ($n = 7$, 14.6%), social sciences and economics ($n = 5$, 10.4%), media and communication ($n = 7$, 14.6%), entrepreneurship and small business ($n = 6$, 12.5%), and other ($n = 2$, 4.2%). The most productive journals in the sample are shown in Table 4.

Table 3. Descriptive classification and analysis of the publication.

	Business and Management ($n = 21$)	Information Systems and Technology ($n = 7$)	Social Sciences and Economics ($n = 5$)	Media and Communication ($n = 7$)	Entrepreneurship and Small Business ($n = 6$)	Other Social and Behavioral Sciences ($n = 2$)	Total ($n = 48$)
Authorship							
Single	4	0	2	2	1	0	9
Co-authorship	8	2	1	4	1	0	26
Multiple authorship	9	5	2	1	4	2	23
Collaboration							
Cross-university	12	7	3	5	5	2	34
Cross-country	4	3	3	4	5	2	21
Cross-continent	2	2	1	1	2	1	9
Type of study							
Empirical	14	5	4	4	2	1	30
Conceptual	6	2	1	2	3	0	14
Review	1	0	0	1	1	1	4
Research method							
Qualitative	8	3	3	3	1	1	19
Quantitative	5	2	1	0	1	0	9
Mixed	1	0	0	1	0	0	2

Table 4. The Most Productive Journals in the Sample.

Journal	Number of Papers ($n \geq 2$)	Impact Factor
Journal of Business Research	4	10.5
Academy of Management Perspectives	3	7.2
Socio-Economic Review	3	3.2
New Media & Society	2	4.5
Small Business Economics	2	6.5
Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal	2	5.4

Regarding authorship patterns, multiple authorship dominated ($n = 23$, 47.9%), followed by co-authorship ($n = 16$, 33.3%), while single authorship was less common ($n = 9$, 18.8%). Among the collaborative works ($n = 39$, excluding single-authored papers), most involved cross-university collaboration ($n = 34$, 87.2%), with cross-country collaboration being substantial ($n = 21$, 53.8%), while cross-continental collaboration was less frequent ($n = 9$, 23.1%).

In terms of research type, empirical studies constituted the majority ($n = 30$, 62.5%), followed by conceptual papers ($n = 14$, 29.2%) and review articles ($n = 4$, 8.3%). Among the empirical studies ($n = 30$), qualitative methods were most prevalent ($n = 19$, 63.3%), followed by quantitative approaches ($n = 9$, 30%), while mixed methods were least common ($n = 2$, 6.7%). This trend suggests a need for more empirical investigations to validate and extend the existing theoretical frameworks and propositions.

5. Findings: Thematic Analysis

5.1. Themes and Issues in the PDE Literature

Following Jones et al. (2011), we employed a systematic and iterative approach to thematic analysis to develop a comprehensive understanding of PDE in the literature. Our analysis process involved multiple stages of coding and theme development. We began by mapping individual publications to emerging first-order themes based on their primary research focus and contributions. These first-order themes were then systematically analyzed and consolidated into more abstract second-order themes that captured broader theoretical patterns. Through an iterative process of comparison and refinement, we aggregated these second-order themes into four major thematic areas that represent the key domains of PDE research. Throughout this process, we maintained analytical rigor

by continuously cross-referencing between different levels of themes and returning to the original publications to verify our categorizations and interpretations. This systematic approach resulted in a hierarchical thematic framework (presented in Table 5) that captured the current knowledge of PDE research, including (1) platform governance mechanisms, (2) platform-based opportunities/constraints, (3) PDE strategies, and (4) identity formation.

Table 5. Thematic analysis results.

Thematic Area	Second-Order Theme	First-Order Theme	Examples
Platform-based Opportunities/Constraints	Enablers/Opportunities	Reduced barriers	Reduced barriers to entry (Zhao 2023; Fu et al. 2023)
		Market access	Access to market and resources (Zhao 2023; Fu et al. 2023; Steedman et al. 2023)
		Innovation	Innovation (Sussan and Acs 2017)
		Entrepreneurial identity	Entrepreneurial identity formation (Lu and Wang 2022)
	Power Imbalance/Constraints	Platform dependence	PDE dependence and lock-in (Cutolo and Kenney 2021; Lu and Wang 2022)
		Value capture	Value capture imbalance (Chandna and Salimath 2022; Drummond et al. 2023)
		Self-commodification	Self-commodification (Cutolo and Grimaldi 2023) and emotional labor (Zhao 2023)
Platform Governance Mechanisms	Control Mechanisms	Search rankings and ratings	Product recommendations, and seller ratings (Kang and Suarez 2022)
		Reward systems	Airbnb's Superhost program (Bosma 2022)
	Alignment Mechanisms	Algorithmic systems	Customer alignment algorithmic systems (Curchod et al. 2019)
		Coordination mechanisms	Coordination mechanisms (Leong et al. 2023): habituation; signaling; anchoring
PDE Strategies	Platform Adaptation	Resource orchestration	Resource orchestration (Lan et al. 2019; Engert et al. 2022)
		Strategic positioning	Strategic positioning (Cutolo and Grimaldi 2023)
	Value Enhancement	Value co-creation	Value co-creation (Chandna and Salimath 2022; Zeng et al. 2023)
		IP development	Intellectual property development (Tschang 2021)
	Autonomy	Multi-homing	Multi-homing (Chandna and Salimath 2022)
		Direct relationships	Direct relationships with customers (Abhishek et al. 2016; Lan et al. 2019)
		Collective action	Collective action (Kuhn and Galloway 2015)
		Income diversification	Diversifying Income (Cutolo and Kenney 2021)
Identity Formation	Identity Factors	Platform features	Platform features and affordances (Lu and Wang 2022; Zhao 2023)
		Governance structures	Governance structures (Lu and Wang 2022)
		Platform narratives	Platform-encouraged narratives (Vieira 2023)
	Main Challenges	Precarious identities	Precarious nature of identities due to platform governance (Lu and Wang 2022)
		Identity redefinition	Continuous redefinition in response to platform changes (Lu and Wang 2022)
		Identity negotiation	Negotiate identities in response to viewer feedback and platform incentives (Meisner and Ledbetter 2022)

5.2. Platform-Based Opportunities and Challenges

The literature identifies the dual nature of platform environments, presenting both opportunities and constraints for entrepreneurs. This thematic area shows enabling factors that facilitate entrepreneurial entry and growth, as well as power imbalances and constraints that challenge entrepreneurs' autonomy and value-capture abilities. Our analysis also synthesizes these power dynamics through a different theoretical lens that creates and maintains power asymmetries between platforms and PDEs.

5.2.1. Platform-Based Opportunities

The emergence of platform-based business models has revolutionized the entrepreneurial landscape, transcending geographical boundaries and socioeconomic disparities by connecting a diverse array of opportunities and resources. This transformative shift has profoundly influenced the entrepreneurial journeys of individuals residing in a wide range of settings, from remote rural villages to bustling urban metropolises.

Social media platforms, for example, have revolutionized the entrepreneurial landscape by significantly lowering entry barriers. These platforms enable individuals to monetize their skills and creativity with minimal initial investment. Recent research shows that digital platforms can even inadvertently transform leisure activities into entrepreneurial pursuits as users find their hobbies evolving into business opportunities through community engagement and recognition mechanisms (Cutolo and Grimaldi 2023). This transformation has unlocked a myriad of possibilities for aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly benefiting those from marginalized communities who have historically struggled to access traditional business avenues (Zhao 2023).

Similarly, sharing economy platforms, such as those facilitating ride-sharing and home-sharing services, are transforming the way entrepreneurs generate income in urban areas (Trabucchi and Buganza 2022). These platforms provide alternative income streams and foster economic resilience, which is particularly crucial for people with limited access to traditional employment options. Moreover, multi-sided platforms play a pivotal role in facilitating cross-border entrepreneurship and trade by connecting buyers and sellers across geographical boundaries, effectively reducing transaction costs, and breaking down barriers to entry (Steedman et al. 2023). This levels the playing field, allowing small and medium-sized enterprises to compete with larger firms and foster a more inclusive and diverse business ecosystem.

5.2.2. Platform-Based Challenges

However, although these platforms offer numerous opportunities, PDEs must also navigate significant challenges when operating within these digital environments. Algorithmic bias and discrimination can inadvertently create invisible barriers and hinder the success of certain groups of entrepreneurs, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds (Nambisan et al. 2018). This highlights the need for platform owners and policymakers to address these biases and ensure a fair environment for all entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the regulatory landscape surrounding platform-based businesses can be complex and uncertain. PDEs must grapple with a myriad of legal requirements, taxation policies, and labor standards that vary across jurisdictions and platform types (Lu and Wang 2022). Navigating this complex web of regulations can be a daunting task for entrepreneurs, constraining their development potential for augmenting skills and abilities (Yao et al. 2022), particularly those who are just starting or operating on a smaller scale.

Another critical challenge is the power imbalance between platform owners and PDEs. PDE's dependence on platforms leaves them vulnerable to the decisions and actions of platform owners, who wield significant control over the rules, resources, and overall environment in which PDEs operate (Kuhn and Maleki 2017; Curchod et al. 2019; Kenney et al. 2021). This power imbalance originates from three technological and economic realities of digital platforms: (1) their ability to leverage winner-take-most dynamics to concentrate users and control market access; (2) the platform's provision of specialized resources that

facilitate PDE participation but create asset specificity and lock-in; and (3) the platform's architectural control and information panopticon, which enables the manipulation of the ecosystem's technological parameters and informational flows (Curchod et al. 2019).

5.2.3. Theoretical Lens of the Power Imbalance Relationship

Existing theories shed light on why platforms hold power over entrepreneurs. The network effects theory explains how a platform's value increases as more users join, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that leads to market concentration (Parker et al. 2016). Platforms that achieve network effects and economies of scale can quickly establish market dominance, creating winner-take-all dynamics (Kenney and Zysman 2016). This concentration of power can lead to platform owners dictating terms and conditions, potentially exploiting PDEs and limiting their bargaining power (Culpepper and Thelen 2020).

Another mechanism that contributes to platform power is the ability to achieve economies of scale. As platforms grow and their user base expands, they can spread fixed costs over a larger number of transactions, reducing the average cost per transaction (Kenney and Zysman 2016). This cost advantage allows dominant platforms to offer users lower prices or better value propositions, further reinforcing their market position. For instance, ride-sharing platforms such as Uber and Lyft have achieved significant economies of scale, enabling them to offer competitive prices and expand rapidly in new markets (Henten and Windekilde 2016).

Furthermore, the power-dependence theory (Emerson 1962) sheds light on the asymmetric power relationships between platforms and PDEs, suggesting that power imbalances arise when one party is more dependent on the other for resources or market access. This dynamic can be observed in the relationship between YouTube and its content creators. Many YouTubers rely on the platform as their primary source of income, which makes them vulnerable to changes in the platform's policies and algorithms (Caplan and Gillespie 2020). In 2017, YouTube's "adpocalypse", a sudden demonetization of videos containing controversial content, significantly impacted the earnings of many creators, who had little recourse against the platform's decision (Poell and Nieborg 2018). Also, Amazon was criticized for its treatment of third-party sellers on its platform. It has been accused of using data from these sellers to launch competing products, forcing them to accept unfavorable terms and arbitrarily suspending accounts (Khan 2016).

To fully harness platforms' potential as enablers of entrepreneurship, addressing these challenges requires a multi-stakeholder approach. This includes promoting digital literacy, investing in inclusive infrastructure, developing supportive regulations, and encouraging responsible platform design and governance. As the platform economy evolves, ongoing research is crucial to understanding the dynamic landscape and identifying effective strategies to support entrepreneurs.

5.3. Platform Governance

Governance in digital platforms is an inherently political process imbued with expressions of power because it affects actors' behavior, beliefs, and opportunities (Lawrence et al. 2012). The policies, governance mechanisms, and technical features platform owners implement can significantly influence who can participate and succeed on these platforms (Agarwal et al. 2023; Sun et al. 2017). We identified two main types of mechanisms from the current literature: control mechanisms and alignment mechanisms.

5.3.1. Control Mechanisms

Control mechanisms are ways platform owners directly influence participant behavior. For example, platform governance can impact entrepreneurial activities through the way it shapes market access and visibility. On e-commerce platforms, the platform's control over search rankings, product recommendations, and seller ratings can greatly influence which entrepreneurs gain traction (Kang and Suarez 2022). Moreover, platforms' content moderation policies and enforcement shape what entrepreneurs are permitted to offer

(Leong et al. 2023). The inconsistency with which some platforms apply their rules can create uncertainty for entrepreneurs (Evans 2009). Being delisted or losing access to a platform can have severe consequences when entrepreneurs rely heavily on a particular platform to reach customers (Leong et al. 2023).

On short-term rental platforms, such as Airbnb, there has been a notable trend toward professionalization among hosts. Airbnb's platform design, including its Superhost program, which rewards high-performing hosts, and its provision of tools and metrics for performance optimization, plays a key role in enabling and incentivizing this professionalization. However, the ability to professionalize successfully is unevenly distributed, favoring hosts with access to property, capital, skills, and time (Bosma 2022).

5.3.2. Alignment Mechanisms

Although platform owners can implement control mechanisms over participants, PDEs retain considerable autonomy as independent economic actors, unlike traditional platform workers. Subjugating their independence through heavy-handed governance risks stifling the very entrepreneurial efforts that platforms seek to harness. Platforms therefore also adapt alignment mechanisms to subtly align PDE activities with platform goals.

Curchod et al. (2019) reveal that eBay effectively coordinates and controls sellers' behavior by aligning the platform's interests with the customers. This alignment is achieved through an algorithmic system that collects, quantifies, and operationalizes customer feedback to sanction or reward sellers based on predefined performance criteria. Consequently, an implicit coalition emerges between the platform owner and the customers, which reinforces the power asymmetries sellers experience at the transactional and governance levels. This "coalition of the invisibles" leaves sellers vulnerable and isolated, for they are subjected to the combined forces of the platform's algorithmic control and the customers' evaluative power. It underscores the subtle yet potent ways digital platforms can exert control over participants, even in the absence of formal authority.

Drawing on meta-organization theory, recent work identified three key coordinative mechanisms employed by platform owners (Taobao) to shape influencers' choices and actions (Da Ren) on the platform, cultivating voluntary cooperation in the digital platform organization (Leong et al. 2023). First, Taobao uses habituation, repeatedly exposing influencers to stimuli, such as rewards, penalties, and reminders, based on codified assessments of their abilities, behaviors, and performance. This process encourages influencers to internalize the platform's desired dispositions and routines, fostering alignment with its objectives. Second, through signaling, it explicitly communicates its strategic decisions using digital symbols and highlights, such as certifications and badges, to align influencers' actions with the platform's preferred value propositions and interactions, particularly when roles and interdependencies evolve. Third, Taobao employs anchoring, deepening influencers' reliance on the digital infrastructure and empowering them to use the platform as a primary base for their entrepreneurial endeavors, even when they explore outside opportunities. This promotes long-term alignment between the platform and its ecosystem members.

Overall, these findings highlight the significant yet often uneven power that platform governance and policies exert over entrepreneurial activities and outcomes. As platforms become increasingly central to economic life, understanding these dynamics becomes crucial for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and researchers (Park et al. 2023). This also highlights the need for greater transparency, accountability, and stakeholder participation in the governance of digital platforms to ensure a more equitable and sustainable platform economy for entrepreneurs.

5.4. Strategies for PDEs

PDEs employ a variety of strategies to navigate the complex platform ecosystem, create value, and maintain their autonomy. These strategies can be categorized into three

main types: platform adaptation strategies, value creation strategies, and autonomy initiative strategies.

5.4.1. Platform Adaptation Strategies

Platform adaptation strategies focus on how PDEs adjust and optimize their practices to align with the platform's ecosystem. These strategies demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness to platform dynamics.

A key strategy in this category is resource orchestration, in which PDEs strategically combine their internal resources with those available through the platform to create unique value propositions (Lan et al. 2019; Engert et al. 2022). This involves leveraging platform-provided tools and data while also developing proprietary assets. Strategic positioning is another crucial adaptation strategy. PDEs can strategically position themselves within the platform ecosystem to capture a larger share of the value they create, such as by specializing in niche areas or offering complementary services (Cutolo and Grimaldi 2023). This positioning allows PDEs to differentiate themselves and potentially mitigate competitive pressures in the platform ecosystem.

5.4.2. Value Creation Strategies

Value creation strategies are intended to enhance the entrepreneur's unique value proposition and competitive advantage, focusing on differentiation and innovation. Value co-creation is a central strategy in this category, in which PDEs engage with other actors in the digital platform ecosystem to jointly create value (Chandna and Salimath 2022; Zeng et al. 2023). This collaborative approach can lead to innovative solutions and stronger market positions. Intellectual property development is another critical value enhancement strategy (Tschang 2021). By creating and protecting unique intellectual property, PDEs can differentiate their offerings, create barriers to imitation, and potentially increase their bargaining power in the platform ecosystem. This strategy can involve developing proprietary technologies, unique content, or innovative business processes that complement the platform's offerings. For example, in the virtual world of "Second Life", PDEs were allowed to retain intellectual property rights over their creations, which led to real-world financial success for them (Tschang 2021).

5.4.3. Autonomy Initiative Strategies

Autonomy initiative strategies encompass efforts to reduce platform dependence and increase operational independence, focusing on long-term sustainability and risk mitigation.

Multi-homing, or participating in multiple platforms simultaneously, is a common strategy entrepreneurs use to mitigate their dependence on any single platform (Chandna and Salimath 2022). This approach allows PDEs to diversify their risk and potentially reach a broader audience. Establishing direct relationships with customers is another key autonomy initiative (Abhishek et al. 2016; Lan et al. 2019). By developing off-platform communication channels and building a loyal customer base, PDEs can reduce their reliance on the platform for customer acquisition and retention. Collective actions, such as forming alliances and participating in entrepreneur associations, can increase PDEs' collective influence and negotiating power in the platform ecosystem (Kuhn and Galloway 2015). Diversifying income sources is also crucial for building autonomy (Cutolo and Kenney 2021). By developing revenue streams beyond the platform, PDEs can reduce their financial dependence and create a more resilient business model. This might involve offering additional services, creating complementary products, or expanding into adjacent markets.

In summary, successful PDEs often employ a combination of these strategies to navigate ecosystem dynamics, create and capture value, and manage resource dependencies. By balancing platform adaptation with value creation and autonomy building, PDEs can work toward a mutually beneficial relationship with platforms. This approach not only helps PDEs thrive but also contributes to the platform ecosystem's overall health and innovation, potentially leading to mutual gains for PDEs and platform owners.

5.5. Entrepreneurial Identities of PDEs

Research on entrepreneurial identity has gained significant traction in recent years as scholars have recognized its crucial role in shaping entrepreneurs' thoughts, actions, and experiences (Baker and Powell 2020; Crosina 2024). Identity-based theories' growing popularity in entrepreneurship research can be attributed to the realization that entrepreneurs and their ventures are highly diverse, rendering traditional approaches focusing on personality characteristics insufficient for capturing the complexity of the entrepreneurial experience (Ireland and Webb 2007). Exploring how entrepreneurs construct, negotiate, and manage their identities is crucial for gaining a deep understanding of the factors that shape new ventures and their development and growth.

The formation of entrepreneurial identities in platform contexts also emerged as a distinct thematic area in our analysis. This theme explores how platform features, governance structures, and narratives shape entrepreneurial identities while also highlighting the main challenges entrepreneurs face in maintaining and adapting their professional identities within platform environments.

PDE's Identity Formation Factors and Main Challenges for PDEs

Lu and Wang's (2022) case study of the 818 Jiazu on the Kuaishou platform illustrates how platform features shape influencers' entrepreneurial identities. Influencers leveraged Kuaishou's live-streaming and e-commerce functionalities to build their brands and businesses, constructing themselves as successful entrepreneurs. However, Kuaishou's repeated suspensions of the 818 Jiazu's leader underscores the precarious nature of these identities through the direct impact of platform governance. This demonstrates how PDEs must continuously redefine and reassert their identities in response to platform changes and governance structures.

Similarly, Zhao's (2023) study on rural live streaming in China demonstrates how rural streamers creatively use platform-afforded features to construct romanticized rural spaces and authentic identities. They engage in intense emotional labor and self-commodification, cultivating intimacy with viewers through nicknames and personal sharing and performing authenticity using rural backgrounds and local accents. However, this constructed rurality is often flattened, decontextualized, and romanticized, ready to be commodified and sold to the audience. Both studies highlight that platform entrepreneurial subjectivity is co-constructed through ongoing negotiation between the entrepreneur and the platform.

Vieira's (2023) case study of the Glovo platform reveals platform companies' roles in shaping entrepreneurial narratives and aspirations. Vieira (2023) critically analyzes how platform companies use the promise of flexibility and entrepreneurial success to recruit and retain platform workers, valorizing individual grit and resilience while obscuring the structural barriers and inequalities that shape platform entrepreneurs' experiences. It shows that couriers often internalize responsibility for their success or failure, rationalizing long hours and dangerous working conditions as necessary entrepreneurial sacrifices. This study highlights that the discursive and material practices of platform companies deeply shape platform entrepreneurial identity.

Meisner and Ledbetter's (2022) study of YouNow live streamers illuminates how platform affordances shape content creators' identities and branding practices. The study reveals that YouNow's design encourages "participatory branding", in which creators and audiences co-construct the streamer's brand identity in real-time. Streamers leverage the platform's affordances for commodification, connection, and aspiration to build their personal brands. Couriers internalize responsibility for their success or failure, rationalizing long hours and hazardous working conditions as necessary entrepreneurial sacrifices. They engage in intense relational labor, cultivating intimacy with viewers through real-time interaction and "authentic" self-presentation. However, the platform's metrics and ranking systems also quantify creators' value, pushing them toward constant self-optimization. The study demonstrates that live-streaming platforms blur the lines between self-branding and

audience participation, with creators having to continuously negotiate their identities in response to viewer feedback and platform incentives.

In summary, these articles reveal that the very meaning of entrepreneurship on a platform is continually shaped through PDEs' interactions with the platform's technical features, governance structures, and discursive practices. These findings highlight the paradoxes and tensions at the heart of platform-dependent entrepreneurship because individuals navigate the promises of autonomy and opportunity alongside the realities of control and risk (Ravenelle 2019). They also show that platform entrepreneurial subjectivity is not a given but an ongoing achievement forged through the complex interplay between individual agency and structural conditions.

6. Discussion

The results of our systematic review suggest that PDEs in the literature challenge traditional entrepreneurship theories by revealing a more fluid, interdependent, and technologically mediated form of entrepreneurship. This extends the "digital entrepreneurship" paradigm (Nambisan 2017; Von Briel et al. 2018) by emphasizing unique challenges and opportunities in platform ecosystems. The power asymmetries in PDE relationships (Cutolo and Kenney 2021) necessitate the integration of the power-dependence theory (Emerson 1962) and resource dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) to explain how PDEs navigate opportunity exploitation and vulnerability mitigation.

Our findings regarding platform governance mechanisms (Leong et al. 2023) and PDEs' strategic responses (Chandna and Salimath 2022) contribute to debates on structure and agency in organization theory (Giddens 1984). The interplay between platform governance and entrepreneurial agency calls for a more dynamic conceptualization of power in platform ecosystems, potentially drawing on practice theory (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011) or structuration theory (Giddens 1984). This reconceptualization could offer valuable insights into how PDEs navigate the constraints platform structures impose while exercising their agency to create value and maintain autonomy.

The co-construction of entrepreneurial identities through platform affordances, audience interactions, and platform-encouraged narratives reveals a more distributed and technologically mediated form of identity work than is typically acknowledged in the literature. This suggests that theories of identity through work in entrepreneurship (Baker and Powell 2020) need to be expanded to account for the role of digital infrastructures, algorithmic governance, and virtual audience interactions in shaping entrepreneurial subjectivities.

As with all studies, this review has limitations that offer opportunities for further research. One of the main challenges was determining whether to include early studies on platform workers or participants as PDEs. The selection process at this stage of the review was largely manual, which means that some relevant articles may have been inadvertently excluded. However, with the further development of a clearer definition of PDEs, researchers can overcome this issue by using more precise search terms and inclusion criteria.

To summarize and guide future research, we outline key research directions, their descriptions, and potential research questions that scholars can explore to advance our understanding of the PDE phenomenon (Table 6).

First, there is a need to refine the conceptual boundaries by developing a more precise and widely accepted definition, drawing on ongoing discussions and policy debates around the classification of platform workers and the self-employed. Researchers could explore what distinguishes a platform entrepreneur from a self-employed individual on platforms.

Second, empirically validating platform business models' heterogeneous impact on PDEs and platform reliance's long-term ramifications for PDEs' entrepreneurial trajectories is paramount to advancing our comprehension of this phenomenon (Gala et al. 2024). Comparative analyses of various platform models (e.g., B2B, B2C, DTC) and their impacts on PDE strategies, outcomes, and experiences could yield valuable insights, building on the emerging literature detailing platform typologies (Gawer 2014) and their implications for

entrepreneurial processes. Also, the long-term impacts of platform dependence on PDEs' entrepreneurial journeys and well-being remain unclear. Longitudinal studies tracking PDE ventures' evolution, growth strategies, and exit options could provide valuable insights into platform-based business models' sustainability and scalability.

Table 6. Future directions and example research questions.

Future Research Direction	Description	Research Questions
Refine conceptual boundaries	Develop a more precise and widely accepted definition, drawing on ongoing discussions and policy debates around the classification of platform workers and the self-employed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What distinguishes a platform entrepreneur from a gig worker or self-employed individual at platform?
Empirical validation	Comparative analyses of different platform models (e.g., B2B, B2C, DTC) and their implications for PDE strategies, outcomes, and experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do platform business models influence the power dynamics and relationships between platform owners and PDEs? What are the long-term growth trajectories and exit options for PDEs.
Dynamic processes and power relations	Adopt a relational or entrepreneur-centric perspective to explore how platform entrepreneurs manage their dependence on platforms over time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What role do PDEs' capabilities and social capital play to negotiate favorable terms and manage their dependence on the platform? What are the key factors that drive platform entrepreneurs to switch between platforms, and how do they manage the transition process to minimize disruption to their businesses?
Interdisciplinary research	Draw insights from fields like sociology, psychology, and business ethics to develop a more comprehensive understanding of platform entrepreneurship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can sociological theories (e.g., social embeddedness, institutional logics) inform our understanding of the social and cultural contexts of platform entrepreneurship? What are important psychological factors (e.g., personality traits, cognitive biases) that influence individuals' decisions to engage in platform entrepreneurship and their subsequent behaviors and outcomes?

Third, adopting a relational or entrepreneur-centric perspective could help explore how PDEs strategize, make decisions, and manage their dependence on platforms over time. Researchers could investigate the role that PDEs' capabilities and social capital play in negotiating favorable terms and managing their dependence on the platform, as well as the key factors that drive platform entrepreneurs to switch between platforms and how they manage the transition process to minimize disruption to their businesses.

Finally, drawing insights from fields such as sociology, psychology, and business ethics could help develop a more comprehensive understanding of platform entrepreneurship. For example, the role of institutional and cultural contexts in shaping PDE dynamics warrants further attention. Cross-cultural comparisons and contextualized analyses could illuminate how local norms, regulations, and infrastructures influence platform entrepreneurs' trajectories, contributing to the growing literature on the contextualization of entrepreneurship research. Also, it is important to explore how psychological factors (e.g., personality traits and cognitive biases) influence individuals' decisions to engage in platform entrepreneurship and their subsequent behaviors and outcomes.

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