

Digital Empowerment and the Rise of Youth Entrepreneurship: Opportunities, Challenges, and a Framework for the Next Generation

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ABSTRACT

The convergence of digital technology and entrepreneurial activity has created both unprecedented opportunities and persistent structural challenges for young people seeking to establish ventures. This review article examines four interrelated dimensions of youth entrepreneurship in the digital era: the enabling and disruptive effects of digital transformation, the persistent gap between traditional educational systems and the competencies demanded by digital entrepreneurship, the psychological foundations of an entrepreneurial mindset, and the role of inclusive ecosystems and supportive policy frameworks. Drawing on a systematic review of recent empirical literature and global data from 2020 to 2025, including evidence from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, OECD, UNDP, and peer-reviewed scholarship, this paper synthesises a coherent framework for empowering youth entrepreneurs across diverse geographic and socioeconomic contexts. The paper identifies key structural failures—including the digital divide, inadequate pedagogical approaches, and equity gaps—and proposes a coordinated policy and ecosystem agenda to address them. Results suggest that unlocking youth entrepreneurial potential requires simultaneous investment in digital infrastructure, experiential education reform, inclusive programme design, and multi-stakeholder ecosystem building.

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Introduction

Few economic phenomena of the past quarter-century have moved as swiftly, or with as much consequence, as the democratisation of entrepreneurship. The combination of affordable digital platforms, ubiquitous internet connectivity, and globally accessible learning tools has transformed what was once a capital-intensive, network-dependent endeavour into something far more accessible—at least for those with reliable technology and the skills to use it. For young people navigating early adulthood in this environment, the stakes are particularly high. They enter labour markets shaped by automation, gig-based employment, and the expectation of lifelong skill reinvention, yet many still pass through educational systems designed for an industrial economy. The gap between these two worlds is precisely where youth entrepreneurship becomes important—not as an alternative to employment, but as a genuine pathway to economic agency and social impact.

The scale of this shift is substantial. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) 2024/2025 Global Report, approximately one in eight working-age people worldwide engaged in entrepreneurial activity, representing nearly 665 million entrepreneurs by the end of 2024 [1]. More strikingly, for the second consecutive year, the youngest adult cohort surveyed—aged 18 to 24—recorded the highest rates of both entrepreneurial activity and intention to start a business within three years [2]. This

generational surge is being driven, in significant part, by digital tools that lower the cost and complexity of launching a venture, from e-commerce platforms to social media marketing channels to online learning environments.

Yet enthusiasm for youth entrepreneurship must be tempered by an honest assessment of who benefits and who remains excluded. Persistent digital divides, under-resourced education systems, thin ecosystems in rural and low-income contexts, and structural biases against women and minorities all constrain the extent to which the digital entrepreneurship promise translates into broad-based opportunity. Research across Nigeria, Southeast Asia, Portugal, Thailand, and the United States points consistently to the same structural bottlenecks, even as the specific forms they take vary by context [3-6].

This paper aims to synthesise recent empirical scholarship across four interconnected themes: digital transformation as both enabler and disruptor; gaps in educational systems; the psychology of the entrepreneurial mindset; and the role of inclusive ecosystems and supportive policy frameworks. In doing so, it responds to an emerging consensus in the literature that piecemeal interventions targeting any single dimension are insufficient—that genuine empowerment of the next generation of entrepreneurs requires coordinated, systemic action.

Digital Transformation as a Structural Game-Changer The Enabling Architecture of Digital Entrepreneurship

Digital technologies have fundamentally restructured the economics of new venture creation. Unlike traditional entrepreneurship, digital

entrepreneurship is characterised by lower entry barriers, global reach, and the capacity for rapid scalability through technology platforms [7,8]. E-commerce ecosystems, social media channels, cloud computing services, and mobile payment infrastructure collectively enable young entrepreneurs to serve international markets from day one, without the overheads historically associated with physical retail or manufacturing. This structural change is not incremental; it represents a genuine discontinuity in how value creation and market access operate.

Social media deserves particular attention as a multifunctional entrepreneurial infrastructure. Research on youth entrepreneurs in emerging markets documents how platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp Business serve not merely as marketing channels but as entire business ecosystems-enabling product discovery, customer engagement, brand construction, and transactional completion within a single environment [9]. Evidence from Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia demonstrates that young entrepreneurs who strategically leverage social media for internationalisation can surmount resource and network constraints previously considered prohibitive for new entrants from developing economies.

Online learning platforms have similarly democratised entrepreneurial skill acquisition. Platforms such as Coursera, edX, and Udemy provide aspiring young entrepreneurs with instruction in product development, digital marketing, financial literacy, and software engineering at minimal cost. This is historically significant: for the first time, geographic location and socioeconomic background are less determinative of access to high-quality entrepreneurship education than at any prior point-though this potential remains unevenly realised.

The Persisting Digital Divide

The transformative potential of digital tools is, however, profoundly uneven in its distribution. The World Bank and International Labour Organization document persistent digital divides-both technological and socioeconomic-that constrain widespread youth participation in the digital economy, particularly among rural and low-income populations [4, 10]. Not all young people have access to reliable internet connectivity, affordable devices, or the digital literacy necessary to leverage available tools productively.

The United States Department of Education's 2024 National Educational Technology Plan identifies three distinct dimensions of the digital divide: an access divide (devices and connectivity), a design divide (quality of digital learning experiences), and a use divide (active versus passive technology engagement) [11]. The persistence of the use divide carries particular significance for youth entrepreneurship. Studies show that students from marginalised communities are often limited to passive technology use-completing digital assignments and watching instructional videos-rather than engaging in the creative, analytical, and productive digital practices that build entrepreneurial capability [12].

As of early 2024, approximately 24 million Americans still lacked access to fixed broadband, disproportionately affecting rural, Indigenous, and low-income communities [12]. Globally, the situation is more acute, with large youth populations in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia lacking both device access and internet connectivity. Addressing the digital divide requires more than infrastructure investment; young people also need the pedagogical support and skills development to engage meaningfully with digital tools once access is secured.

Educational Gaps and the Case for Transformative Pedagogy

Structural Misalignment in Traditional Educational Systems
Despite the surge in youth entrepreneurial activity, traditional educational systems remain poorly aligned with the competencies required for entrepreneurial success. Curricula in most national systems continue to prioritise theoretical knowledge transmission over the practical skills of opportunity recognition, risk assessment, creative problem-solving, and iterative product development. This structural mismatch constrains schools' capacity to serve as genuine incubators of entrepreneurial talent and leaves students underprepared for a labour market that increasingly rewards adaptability and innovation.

Recent scholarship underscores the importance of specific competency profiles for digital-era entrepreneurship. Research on university students in Thailand found that effective entrepreneurship education must develop digital awareness, strategic analysis, creativity, communication, and problem-solving capabilities, with entrepreneurial ecosystems and perceived entrepreneurial orientation significantly influencing entrepreneurial intentions [13]. A study from Portugal using a sample of 417 higher education students demonstrates that an innovative digital attitude positively influences digital entrepreneurial intention, while risk-taking and proactiveness-traits often suppressed by conventional pedagogy-are among the most influential personality-based predictors of entrepreneurial behaviour [6].

A further complication arises from what scholars describe as 'exploration overload' in digital learning environments. Research published in *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* (2025), drawing on 381 valid survey responses across Chinese universities and vocational colleges, found that while digital competence exerts a significant positive effect on entrepreneurial intention ($\beta = 0.238, p < 0.001$), information overload and excessive curiosity in uncertain digital contexts can paradoxically reduce intention formation [14]. This finding has important pedagogical implications: entrepreneurship education must cultivate not only digital skills but also the metacognitive and emotional regulation capacities that enable students to navigate complexity without becoming paralysed by it.

Action-Based Learning as the Emerging Consensus

The scholarly consensus in entrepreneurship education research favours experiential, action-based learning over conventional content delivery. A 2025 study developing an entrepreneurial ecosystem framework for student-led start-ups in higher education found that experiential activities-hackathons, workshops, mentored project work-consistently rated higher in perceived contribution to early-stage venture success than static infrastructural supports such as accelerator programmes or formal training sequences alone [15]. Learning from practitioners with real-world entrepreneurial experience improves both entrepreneurial competence and venture survival rates more effectively than institutional frameworks in isolation [15].

Internationally, there is growing policy traction for this shift. China's Ministry of Education issued the Shanghai Declaration on Digital Education in 2024, which underscored the imperative to ensure that digital education benefits all learners equitably, aligning with the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals [16]. The declaration explicitly calls for deepening the integration of artificial intelligence technologies into pedagogical practice and building open, inclusive learning systems-directions directly relevant to entrepreneurship education worldwide.

The Entrepreneurial Mindset: Psychology, Motivation, and Identity Entrepreneurial success is not determined solely by technical skills or market access. A substantial and growing body of evidence highlights the central role of psychological and attitudinal factors, collectively described as the ‘entrepreneurial mindset’. This construct encompasses resilience, creativity, leadership, adaptability, and self-motivation—qualities that enable individuals to identify opportunities, navigate uncertainty, recover from failure, and build organisations from the ground up. Cultivating this disposition early in young people’s development is increasingly recognised as foundational, rather than supplementary, to entrepreneurship education.

Research examining the psychological mechanisms behind entrepreneurial intention finds that entrepreneurial passion, curiosity, and digital competence interact with alertness and motivation to shape young people’s readiness to venture [14]. Critically, entrepreneurial motivation functions as a moderating force: it converts psychological traits and cognitive capabilities into actionable commitment-determining whether individuals are willing to invest resources, bear risk, and persist through adversity. Without this motivational layer, even strong digital competence and positive attitudes may not translate into venture creation behaviour.

The concept of ‘0 to 1 thinking’-building something genuinely novel rather than iterating on existing solutions-is increasingly recognised as a distinguishing feature of high-impact entrepreneurship. Fostering this disposition requires educational environments that reward experimentation and tolerate failure, conditions that many conventional school cultures actively discourage. Evidence from ScienceDirect (2025) suggests that early career promotions and leadership opportunities create a virtuous cycle: firms with younger workforces that promote young individuals to management positions accelerate the development of entrepreneurial confidence and skills, substantially increasing venture creation propensity.

An important counterpoint from the recent literature concerns investor perceptions of youth. Experimental research using AI-manipulated entrepreneur ages found that investors may discriminate against younger entrepreneurs based on perceived inexperience, even when controlling for venture quality [17]. This finding suggests that, beyond developing the mindset itself, young entrepreneurs need support in effectively communicating their capabilities, building credibility through demonstrated track records, and accessing mentors who can provide social capital and third-party endorsement.

Importantly, younger generations exhibit a distinctive motivational orientation that sets them apart from older entrepreneurs. Research consistently finds that both younger and older entrepreneurs prioritise social and environmental value creation relative to middle-aged entrepreneurs, who tend to emphasise commercial value creation [18]. This generational orientation toward purpose-driven entrepreneurship-documented across multiple countries and institutional contexts-represents an underexploited asset for addressing pressing global challenges. Educational systems and ecosystem builders that channel this motivation through appropriate structural support may unlock a distinctive cohort of socially oriented innovators.

Inclusivity and Equity in Youth Entrepreneurship

The promise of digital entrepreneurship as a democratising force is systematically undermined by structural inequalities that

exclude young people from rural areas, low-income backgrounds, and marginalised communities-including women and ethnic minorities-from full participation. The United Nations Capital Development Fund documents that in most ASEAN and SAARC countries, young women are significantly less confident in their business skills than young men, creating a self-reinforcing barrier to inclusive entrepreneurial growth that digital access alone cannot resolve [3].

Empirical evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia confirms that digital entrepreneurship can create meaningful economic opportunity for disadvantaged youth when appropriate enabling conditions are in place. Research from Southeast Nigeria demonstrates that digital entrepreneurship skills create pathways to self-employment, support local content development, and generate export income for young entrepreneurs who previously lacked market access [5]. However, the same research identifies the critical role of public and private sector initiatives-including subsidised devices, community technology hubs, and startup incubators-in making these outcomes accessible to young people without existing resource advantages.

The McKinsey Global Institute estimates that closing gender gaps in entrepreneurship could add \$12 trillion to global GDP [1]. Achieving this potential requires targeted interventions: inclusive funding programmes designed around women’s specific access barriers, gender-sensitive mentorship structures, and the removal of legal and social constraints that disproportionately limit women’s entrepreneurial participation. Positive trends are visible in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, where targeted public programmes have improved young women’s entrepreneurial confidence to levels comparable with their male peers [3].

Scholars caution that digital entrepreneurship, if poorly governed, risks reinforcing existing inequalities by concentrating benefits among young people with strong networks and educational capital [19]. This risk demands a deliberate equity lens in programme design: initiatives targeting youth entrepreneurship must be assessed not only for aggregate outcomes but for their distributional impact across gender, geography, income level, and ethnicity.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystems: Networks, Incubators, and Mentorship

Ecosystem Architecture and the Role of Support Structures

Entrepreneurial ecosystems-comprising mentors, investors, incubators, accelerators, universities, and community organisations-play a fundamental role in determining whether individual entrepreneurial potential translates into viable ventures. Research adopting an ecosystem perspective frames startup outcomes as the result of interactions between institutional conditions, individual attributes, and enabling contextual factors such as mentorship, funding, and networks [20]. For young entrepreneurs who typically lack the experience, networks, and financial capital of older counterparts, ecosystem support is not merely helpful-it is often decisive.

The global startup incubator market reflects growing recognition of this need. Valued at approximately USD 5.50 billion in 2024, it is projected to reach USD 13.20 billion by 2033, growing at a compound annual growth rate of approximately 14% . This expansion is driven by rising entrepreneurial activity worldwide and the recognition that structured support systems substantially improve startup survival and growth rates. Leading incubators such as Techstars and HAX Accelerator are integrating AI-based mentorship matching and virtual incubation platforms,

expanding their geographic reach and enabling support for young entrepreneurs regardless of physical location [21].

Digital ecosystems are particularly valuable for bridging geographic disadvantage. For youth entrepreneurs in rural or remote locations, virtual incubation platforms and online professional networks provide access to mentors, investors, and peer communities that previously required physical proximity. The UNDP South Africa initiative exemplifies this model: through digital youth innovation programmes, accelerator labs, and the Higher Education Innovation Fund, the programme has empowered young people to become job creators and innovators across sectors including water security, clean energy, and food systems [22].

Mentorship, Peer Networks, and the Relational Dimension

Among the components of entrepreneurial ecosystems, mentorship emerges consistently as a high-impact factor for young entrepreneurs. Learning from practitioners-experienced founders and industry professionals-improves both entrepreneurial competence and venture survival rates more effectively than formal institutional support alone [15]. Mentorship provides not only technical guidance but also emotional validation, social capital, and modelling of entrepreneurial identity, all of which are particularly formative for young people at early stages of venture development.

Research on incubators serving young entrepreneurs in Spain identified the frequency and quality of training events and mentorship activities as key differentiators between effective and ineffective programmes [23]. While physical workspace and administrative support matter, it is the relational dimension-access to experienced entrepreneurs, investor networks, and peer communities-that most significantly shapes outcomes for young ventures. This implies that ecosystem design for youth entrepreneurship should prioritise human capital linkages over infrastructure investment, a counterintuitive but empirically grounded conclusion.

Policy and Reform: Building the Enabling Environment

The evidence reviewed in this paper makes a compelling case for comprehensive, multi-level policy reform. Effective youth entrepreneurship policy must simultaneously address digital infrastructure, educational transformation, regulatory frameworks, access to finance, and ecosystem development. None of these dimensions is sufficient on its own; it is their integration that creates the conditions for sustained, broad-based youth entrepreneurial activity.

On the education front, governments must move beyond incremental curriculum adjustment toward systemic pedagogical transformation. This requires embedding entrepreneurship education across grade levels-not solely within business or commerce courses-and prioritising action-based, project-driven learning that develops both technical and entrepreneurial competencies simultaneously. Portugal's Startup Portugal initiative, launched in 2016 and supported by the National Incubator Network, offers a concrete model for government-led ecosystem building that connects startups with institutional support, investment, and mentorship infrastructure [6].

Public-private collaboration emerges as an essential scaling mechanism. India's Digital India initiative, which has stimulated youth-led startups in education, health, and agriculture, demonstrates how government-led digital infrastructure investment can catalyse

entrepreneurial activity when complemented by private sector engagement [4]. Similarly, government-backed incubators and accelerators in emerging markets-particularly in India, Brazil, Indonesia, and across Africa-have created favourable conditions by combining regulatory support, subsidised workspace, and mentorship provision [21].

Research on entrepreneurial ecosystems highlights the importance of institutional support in moderating the relationship between individual entrepreneurial orientation and actual venture creation. Srivastava (2025) finds that abundant institutional support strengthens the connection between entrepreneurial orientation and entrepreneurial intentions, particularly in emerging economies where ecosystem infrastructure remains underdeveloped [13]. This evidence supports sustained, long-term public investment in ecosystem building as a structural precondition for youth entrepreneurship at scale.

Access to finance remains a persistent structural barrier. Small Business Administration data (2024) indicate that startup employers are less likely than established firms to receive full bank financing approval [1]. Addressing this requires innovative financing mechanisms-including microfinance, peer-to-peer lending, crowdfunding platforms, and government-backed seed funds-specifically designed for early-stage youth ventures. Equity considerations must be built into financing programme design from the outset, with targeted provisions for women, minorities, and geographically disadvantaged young entrepreneurs.

Discussion

The evidence reviewed across the preceding sections traces a coherent, if multidimensional, picture of youth entrepreneurship in the digital age. Digital transformation creates genuine and expanding opportunity, but the extent to which individual young people can access this opportunity is profoundly shaped by educational quality, mindset development, ecosystem density, and structural equity. These factors interact dynamically: educational gaps limit mindset development; thin ecosystems undercut the conversion of intention into action; policy failures permit structural inequities to persist and compound over time.

A particularly important synthesis concerns the relationship between individual psychological factors and structural conditions. While entrepreneurial intention research has made significant advances in mapping the psychological antecedents of venture creation, there is a risk of overemphasising individual mindset at the expense of structural analysis. Young people from resource-constrained environments may possess strong entrepreneurial orientation and genuine motivation, but without supportive ecosystems, quality education, and access to capital, intention rarely converts to sustained action. Research and policy must hold both dimensions in view simultaneously.

The generational orientation of younger entrepreneurs toward social and environmental value creation-documented across multiple contexts and institutional settings represents an underexploited policy resource [17, 18]. At a time when the global economy confronts pressing challenges of climate change, inequality, and public health disruption, the entrepreneurial energy of young people aligned with social purpose offers transformative potential. Policymakers and ecosystem builders who deliberately channel this motivation through appropriate structural supports may unlock a generation of impact entrepreneurs with distinctive capacity to address societal challenges at scale.

Conclusion

Youth entrepreneurship in the digital age represents one of the most significant-and most unevenly distributed-opportunities of our time. The evidence reviewed in this paper confirms that digital technologies have meaningfully lowered barriers to venture creation and expanded the potential for young people to participate in the global economy as creators and innovators. Yet this potential is realised incompletely and unequally, constrained by educational systems that have not kept pace with the skills demanded by digital entrepreneurship, structural inequities that exclude large segments of young people from participation, and ecosystem gaps that leave entrepreneurial intention without the scaffolding needed to become viable ventures.

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action across multiple levels of governance and across public and private sectors: curricula reform that embeds experiential learning across educational systems; targeted digital infrastructure investment that reaches the most excluded communities; ecosystem development that prioritises mentorship, peer networks, and inclusive access to finance; and policy frameworks that build equity considerations into every dimension of youth entrepreneurship support from the design stage.

Future research should address several important gaps identified in this review. Longitudinal studies tracking the long-term venture outcomes of young entrepreneurs who receive different types of ecosystem support would substantially strengthen the evidence base for investment decisions. More granular comparative work on the differential effectiveness of educational interventions across geographic and socioeconomic contexts is also needed. Finally, the wellbeing of young entrepreneurs-whom research identifies as at elevated risk of overextension and burnout relative to older counterparts deserves greater scholarly and policy attention as the field matures [24,25].

The next generation of entrepreneurs is already here. They are digitally fluent, socially motivated, globally connected, and increasingly active in building ventures that address real-world problems. Whether that energy is channelled productively or wasted through preventable structural failures depends not on their potential, but on the decisions made by educators, policymakers, investors, and ecosystem builders in the years ahead.

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