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Beyond Organisational Scale: How Digital Micro-Entrepreneurs Build International Businesses and Challenge the Competitive Advantages of Large Corporations

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ABSTRACT: For most of the twentieth century, organisational scale was treated as the main source of competitive advantage in international business. Large corporations could spread fixed costs over high volumes, finance foreign direct investment, and build distribution networks that smaller rivals could not match. This paper argues that digital technologies are loosening that logic. Drawing on the literatures on digital entrepreneurship, international new ventures, the resource-based view, dynamic capabilities and platform ecosystems, we examine how digital micro-entrepreneurs, defined as owner-operated ventures with very few employees that run their core activities through digital platforms and tools, build and sustain international businesses. We develop an integrative framework in which four digital affordances (low-cost market access, modular outsourcing, data-driven learning and community-based trust) shape three entrepreneurial capabilities (digital orchestration, rapid experimentation and network-based credibility). These capabilities, in turn, allow micro-entrepreneurs to erode specific scalebased advantages of large firms in niche and long-tail markets. We advance six propositions, discuss boundary conditions including platform dependence and institutional constraints in emerging economies, and outline a research agenda for empirical testing. The paper contributes to international entrepreneurship by shifting attention from firm size to orchestration capacity, and offers implications for micro-entrepreneurs, platform operators, financial institutions and policymakers.

KEYWORDS: digital entrepreneurship, micro-entrepreneurs, international new ventures, competitive advantage, platform ecosystems, born global, emerging economies

1. INTRODUCTION

The classic account of corporate competitive advantage rests on scale and scope (Chandler, 1990). Large firms internationalise through gradual commitment of resources, building foreign knowledge and establishing subsidiaries, distribution channels and brands (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). Their size supports bargaining power with suppliers, investment in research and development, and the capacity to absorb the fixed costs and risks of operating across borders. Under this view, small firms are expected to be domestically focused, and international expansion is something that comes late, if at all.

This view has been challenged for more than three decades. Oviatt and McDougall (1994) described international new ventures that are international from or near their founding, and subsequent work on born-global firms showed that innovation capability and entrepreneurial orientation can matter more than age or size (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004; Mathews & Zander, 2007). Digital technologies have intensified this challenge. Online marketplaces, social media, payment services, cloud software, printon-demand and cross-border logistics providers now allow a single individual, working from a home or a small office, to reach customers in many countries. The unit of analysis in such cases is not a large organisation but an individual or a very small team connected to a wider digital ecosystem.

We call these actors *digital micro-entrepreneurs*. They include independent online sellers who ship to foreign buyers, freelancers who serve overseas clients through remote work platforms, content creators who monetise a global audience, and founders of

micro software or design businesses distributed through app stores and online marketplaces. Many of them operate with no more than a handful of workers, and they often start with limited capital. Yet some of them build durable cross-border businesses and, in particular niches, compete successfully against large corporations.

This phenomenon raises a theoretical puzzle. If scale-based resources underpin competitive advantage, how can micro-entrepreneurs compete internationally? Existing literature offers partial answers. Digital entrepreneurship research highlights the fluidity of digital artefacts and the reduced boundaries of entrepreneurial processes (Nambisan, 2017; Nambisan, Wright & Feldman, 2019). Work on digital affordances shows how technologies shape the creation of ventures and ecosystems (Autio et al., 2018). Platform research explains how external ecosystems provide capabilities that once had to be owned (Gawer & Cusumano, 2014; Parker, Van Alstyne & Choudary, 2016). However, these streams have rarely been integrated to explain the competitive position of micro-entrepreneurs relative to large corporations.

This paper addresses the gap with a conceptual analysis. Our research question is: *Through which mechanisms do digital micro-entrepreneurs build international businesses, and under what conditions do these mechanisms challenge the competitive advantages traditionally associated with large corporations?* We make three contributions. First, we define digital micro-entrepreneurship as a distinct unit of analysis for international business research. Second, we develop a framework linking digital affordances, entrepreneurial capabilities and competitive outcomes. Third, we specify propositions and boundary conditions, including a critical view that avoids treating digital technologies as a universal equaliser.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical background. Section 3 develops the framework and propositions. Section 4 describes the methodological approach and proposes an empirical design. Section 5 discusses implications, Section 6 notes limitations and future research, and Section 7 concludes.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Scale as a source of competitive advantage

The resource-based view holds that sustained competitive advantage arises from resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991). For large corporations, many such resources are connected to size: capital, brand equity, global distribution, proprietary technology, and the managerial hierarchies that coordinate complex activities. Penrose (1959) emphasised that firm growth is shaped by managerial capacity and the accumulation of resources over time, a view that was later extended to explain why firms internationalise through gradual stages.

The Uppsala model argues that internationalisation is incremental, because firms lack knowledge of foreign markets and reduce uncertainty through experience (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). In its revised form, the model highlights the liability of outsidership: firms are disadvantaged less by foreignness itself than by lacking positions in relevant business networks (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). This revision is important for our argument, because digital platforms and online communities can give small actors network positions that previously took years to build.

2.2 International new ventures and born-global firms

The international new venture literature showed that some firms internationalise rapidly and with few resources, relying on founders' knowledge, networks and the ability to combine resources across borders (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994; Zahra & George, 2002). Knight and Cavusgil (2004) found that bornglobal firms are characterised by strong innovation orientation and distinctive organisational capabilities, rather than by size. Coviello (2015) warned that born-global research needs to be reconceptualised, with more attention to network and temporal dynamics. Mathews and Zander (2007) described international entrepreneurial dynamics as a process of discovery, positioning and exploitation of opportunities across borders.

This literature largely concerns venture-backed or small and medium-sized firms with identifiable organisational structures. Digital micro-entrepreneurs push the logic further, because some of them are essentially one-person firms whose operational boundaries are defined by the platforms and service providers they use.

2.3 Digital technologies, affordances and entrepreneurship

Yoo, Henfridsson and Lyytinen (2010) described a new organising logic of digital innovation, in which digital technologies are modular, editable and combinable, and in which products can be continually reconfigured after release. Nambisan (2017) argued that digital technologies create new possibilities for entrepreneurial processes and outcomes by reducing the boundaries of ventures and enabling distributed agency. Nambisan, Wright and Feldman (2019) subsequently argued that digitalisation transforms innovation and entrepreneurship at the level of the process, the outcome and the surrounding ecosystem.

Autio et al. (2018) introduced the idea of digital affordances, that is, the possibilities for action that digital technologies offer entrepreneurs, and combined this with spatial affordances to explain how entrepreneurial ecosystems arise. Sussan and Acs (2017)

proposed the digital entrepreneurial ecosystem as an integration of digital infrastructure, digital user citizenship, digital marketplaces and digital entrepreneurship. Ghezzi and Cavallo (2020) showed how lean start-up approaches support agile business model innovation in digital ventures. Together, these studies suggest that technology does not determine outcomes by itself; rather, outcomes depend on how entrepreneurs perceive and use affordances.

2.4 Platforms and ecosystems

Platforms host complementary products and services and enable interactions between producers and consumers (Gawer & Cusumano, 2014; Parker et al., 2016). Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014) argued that digital technologies reduce marginal costs and enable new forms of business at unprecedented speed. Anderson (2006) described the long tail, in which low distribution costs make niche products economically viable in aggregate. Brynjolfsson, Hu and Smith (2003) found that online retail markets can provide substantial consumer benefits from increased product variety. These studies imply that demand for specialised offerings can be served economically by actors without large physical infrastructure.

The platform logic, however, has a second face. Platform owners control access, fees, algorithms and rules, and entrepreneurs who rely on a single platform can be vulnerable to changes that they cannot influence. Any argument about micro-entrepreneurial advantage should therefore account for platform dependence.

2.5 Capabilities, effectuation and bricolage

Dynamic capabilities, the ability to integrate, build and reconfigure competences in changing environments (Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997), are often viewed as the foundation of advantage under rapid change. Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) argued that dynamic capabilities consist of specific and identifiable processes, such as product development and alliance formation, which are common across firms, and that in fast-moving markets they are simple, experiential and unstable. This characterisation is consistent with small actors that learn and change quickly.

Sarasvathy (2001) distinguished causation from effectuation: the former starts from a goal and selects means, while the latter starts from available means (who I am, what I know, whom I know) and lets goals emerge through commitments from stakeholders. Baker and Nelson (2005) described entrepreneurial bricolage as making do with resources at hand and recombining them for new purposes. Fischer and Reuber (2011) showed that interactions on social media can influence effectual thinking and behaviour. These perspectives are particularly relevant for micro-entrepreneurs who face resource constraints but have access to large digital networks.

2.6 Networks and trust

Granovetter (1973) argued that weak ties are valuable because they bridge otherwise disconnected social groups and provide access to novel information. Online communities, reviews and ratings function as large-scale weak-tie systems that can substitute for the brand reputation and personal relationships that were historically necessary for cross-border trade. von Hippel (2005) added that users themselves are a source of innovation; micro-entrepreneurs who engage closely with user communities can integrate such innovation into their offerings quickly. Chesbrough (2003) similarly argued that firms should combine internal and external ideas, a principle that micro-entrepreneurs follow by necessity.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS

3.1 Defining digital micro-entrepreneurs

We define a digital micro-entrepreneur as an individual or very small team that owns and operates a business whose primary value creation, customer acquisition and transaction processes are conducted through digital platforms and tools, and which serves or sources from customers or partners in more than one country. Three features distinguish them from conventional small firms: (a) the near-absence of owned physical infrastructure, (b) reliance on third-party platforms and service providers for core functions, and (c) an interaction with customers that is mediated and often public (for example through reviews and social media).

3.2 Digital affordances

Building on Autio et al. (2018) and Nambisan (2017), we identify four affordances that are especially relevant for international micro-entrepreneurship.

1. **Low-cost market access:** Marketplaces, social media and search technologies allow entrepreneurs to reach foreign customers without establishing local presence.
2. **Modular outsourcing:** Cloud services, freelancers, payment processors, fulfilment and logistics providers allow functions that once required internal departments to be rented on demand (Yoo et al., 2010).

3. **Data-driven learning:** Analytics and customer feedback allow rapid testing and adjustment of offerings, supporting experimentation (Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020).
4. **Community-based trust:** Ratings, reviews and online communities create reputational signals that reduce the liability of outsidership (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009).

3.3 Entrepreneurial capabilities

Affordances are only potentials. Whether they are realised depends on capabilities, which we frame at the level of the individual or micro-team as follows.

- **Digital orchestration capability:** the ability to select, combine and coordinate external platforms and providers into a coherent value chain. This is an application of dynamic capabilities (Teece et al., 1997) and of bricolage (Baker & Nelson, 2005) to the ecosystem setting.
- **Rapid experimentation capability:** the ability to launch, test and revise offerings quickly, in line with effectual logic (Sarasvathy, 2001) and lean approaches (Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020).
- **Network-based credibility capability:** the ability to build and maintain trust with distant customers and partners through consistent service, transparent communication and community participation (Granovetter, 1973; Fischer & Reuber, 2011).

3.4 Propositions

Proposition 1 The greater the extent to which micro-entrepreneurs use digital market access affordances, the earlier and faster their internationalisation will be, relative to what the Uppsala stage model predicts for firms of comparable size.

This proposition extends the born-global argument (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994; Knight & Cavusgil, 2004) by suggesting that digital access substitutes for physical market presence, reducing the need for incremental commitment.

Proposition 2 Digital orchestration capability mediates the relationship between modular outsourcing affordances and international business performance of micro-entrepreneurs.

Access to providers does not itself create advantage, since providers are available to all. What differs is the capacity to combine them effectively, which is consistent with the view that advantage derives from capabilities rather than resources alone (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000).

Proposition 3 Rapid experimentation capability strengthens the relationship between data-driven learning affordances and the ability of micro-entrepreneurs to serve niche segments better than large corporations.

Large corporations can also use analytics, but their decision-making hierarchies, brand commitments and established product lines may slow adaptation, a dynamic related to the incumbent difficulties described by Christensen (1997). Micro-entrepreneurs have shorter decision loops and fewer legacy commitments.

Proposition 4 Network-based credibility capability substitutes, in part, for brand reputation as a source of customer trust in cross-border transactions, thereby reducing the liability of outsidership for microentrepreneurs.

Proposition 5 The competitive impact of digital micro-entrepreneurs on large corporations is strongest in niche, customisation-intensive and long-tail segments, and weakest in segments characterised by high capital intensity, regulatory complexity or the need for physical scale (for example heavy manufacturing and regulated financial services).

This proposition prevents overgeneralisation. The challenge to corporate advantage is selective: it concerns those advantages that arise from distribution reach, information asymmetry and coordination costs, not those that arise from capital intensity or regulation (Chandler, 1990; Anderson, 2006).

Proposition 6 Platform dependence moderates the relationship between digital capabilities and the sustainability of micro-entrepreneurial advantage, such that high dependence on a single platform weakens sustainability.

Because platform owners control rules and fees (Gawer & Cusumano, 2014; Parker et al., 2016), entrepreneurs who diversify across platforms and build direct customer relationships should be more resilient.

3.5 Integrative model

The framework can be summarised as a chain. Digital affordances (market access, modular outsourcing, data-driven learning, community trust) create possibilities. Entrepreneurial capabilities (orchestration, experimentation, credibility) determine whether these possibilities are realised. The realised possibilities lead to international business outcomes (speed and scope of internationalisation, revenue from foreign customers, survival) and to a competitive position relative to large corporations in specific market segments. Three moderators shape the chain: platform dependence, institutional environment (including payment, logistics and regulatory conditions) and market type (niche versus mass).

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Approach

This paper is conceptual. We followed a structured, integrative review approach, drawing on foundational and recent theoretical and empirical studies in international entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship, strategy and platform research. Sources were selected for their theoretical relevance to scale-based advantage, internationalisation and digital affordances. Propositions were derived through analytical reasoning and by comparing the assumptions of different theoretical streams, in line with theory-building practice (Eisenhardt, 1989). No primary data were collected for this manuscript, and the propositions should be understood as theoretical statements that require empirical testing.

4.2 Proposed empirical design

To support future testing, we suggest a mixed-methods programme.

Qualitative phase: Multiple-case studies (Yin, 2018) of digital micro-entrepreneurs in different sectors and countries, selected through theoretical sampling. Data could include semi-structured interviews, platform performance records and customer communications, analysed with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Case comparison would help identify how orchestration, experimentation and credibility capabilities are built and how they differ between successful and unsuccessful ventures.

Quantitative phase: A survey of micro-entrepreneurs operating on major platforms, with validated scales adapted for affordance use, capability, platform dependence and international performance. Structural equation modelling or moderated mediation analysis could test Propositions 2, 3 and 6. A comparison sample of small conventional exporters would allow assessment of the relative effect of digital capabilities.

Contextual sampling: Because institutional conditions matter, we recommend samples from both developed and emerging economies, including South Asian contexts where digital payments, crossborder shipping and platform access may differ from those in advanced economies.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical implications

First, the framework suggests that the relevant source of advantage for micro-entrepreneurs is not ownership of resources but the orchestration of access to them. This extends the resource-based view (Barney, 1991) toward an ecosystem perspective, in which value is created by combining externally owned resources. It is consistent with the argument that digital technologies shift the boundaries of ventures (Nambisan, 2017).

Second, the paper qualifies the Uppsala model's emphasis on incremental commitment. In digital contexts, network positions can be acquired through platform participation and reputation systems rather than through long periods of physical presence, which weakens the liability of outsidership (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). The stage model may continue to hold in sectors where physical presence is essential, which is why boundary conditions matter.

Third, we contribute to the born-global debate by identifying a limiting case in which the firm is almost entirely a node in an ecosystem. The question then becomes whether the concept of a firm as a unit of analysis remains adequate or needs to be supplemented by the concept of an entrepreneurial ecosystem position (Autio et al., 2018).

5.2 Which corporate advantages are challenged?

The framework implies a selective erosion of corporate advantages. Advantages arising from distribution reach (the ability to place products before customers worldwide) are weakened because platforms offer similar reach to micro-entrepreneurs at low cost. Advantages arising from information (knowing market preferences) are weakened where customer feedback is publicly available and analytic tools are cheap. Advantages arising from internal coordination are partly weakened by modular outsourcing. By contrast, advantages arising from capital intensity, patents, regulatory licences, large-scale manufacturing and deep bargaining power are largely unaffected. Large corporations also retain the capacity to respond by acquiring successful micro-ventures, by launching their own platforms, or by cooperating with microentrepreneurs as part of their supply or distribution ecosystems.

5.3 A critical view: power asymmetry and fragility

A celebratory account of digital micro-entrepreneurship would be misleading. Micro-entrepreneurs are exposed to platform power, algorithmic changes, payment restrictions, intellectual property infringement and currency risks. Competition among micro-entrepreneurs can be intense, as low entry barriers also attract many entrants. Customers' trust can be lost through a few negative reviews. Moreover, micro-entrepreneurs may remain fragile and low-income, so that 'international business' does not necessarily imply sustainable growth. These tensions underline Proposition 6 and justify the call for research on resilience.

5.4 Emerging economy considerations

In emerging economies, digital micro-entrepreneurs may face constraints in access to international payment systems, foreign exchange regulation, logistics reliability and credit. At the same time, they may have access to low-cost skilled labour and strong incentives to seek foreign demand. The institutional environment therefore influences both the potential and the limits of the mechanisms outlined here. Banks and financial institutions are relevant actors, because micro-entrepreneurs need payment channels, working capital and trade finance products that fit very small, digitally operating businesses. This is an area in which empirical evidence from emerging markets would be especially valuable.

5.5 Practical implications

For micro-entrepreneurs: invest in orchestration skills and in diversification across platforms; build direct customer relationships through owned channels; use experimentation to find niches where scale offers limited advantage; and treat credibility as a strategic asset.

For large corporations: monitor niche segments for micro-entrepreneurial entrants; consider partnerships and ecosystem strategies; and reduce decision latency in markets where customisation and speed matter.

For platform operators: transparent and stable rules, fair fee structures and tools that support compliance and cross-border logistics can help sustain the ecosystem on which their own value depends.

For financial institutions and policymakers: design financial products (such as accessible cross-border payment services, micro-trade finance and appropriate credit assessments) that recognise digital revenue streams; support digital skills and consumer protection; and reduce regulatory frictions for small cross-border digital trade.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The paper has several limitations. It is conceptual, and the propositions have not been tested. The definition of digital micro-entrepreneurs encompasses diverse activities (selling goods, providing services, creating content) that may differ in their mechanisms. The literature on which we draw is concentrated on developed economies, and its transfer to emerging economies requires care. Rapid technological change, including developments in artificial intelligence, may alter the affordances discussed here, potentially making capabilities even more accessible to micro-entrepreneurs while also strengthening the data and computing advantages of large firms.

Future research could (a) test the propositions using the mixed-methods design above; (b) compare outcomes across product, service and content-based micro-ventures; (c) examine how microentrepreneurs transition to growth, including hiring and formalisation; (d) study the role of gender, education and social capital in shaping capability development; (e) investigate how large corporations respond strategically; and (f) analyse the effect of platform governance changes on microentrepreneurial survival.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that digital technologies change the relationship between organisational scale and international competitiveness, but selectively and conditionally. Digital micro-entrepreneurs access global markets, outsource functions modularly, learn from data and build trust through communities. Whether they turn these affordances into durable advantage depends on their capabilities of orchestration, experimentation and credibility, and on moderators such as platform dependence and institutional context. In niche and long-tail segments, these mechanisms can erode the distribution, information and coordination advantages of large corporations, while capital-intensive and regulated segments remain relatively protected. By shifting the focus from firm size to orchestration capacity, the paper offers a basis for rethinking international entrepreneurship in the digital era and for empirical work that tests the propositions presented here.

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