

## The Impact of Digital Platforms on Youth Entrepreneurship and Self-Employment in Fes City

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### Abstract

This study aims to examine the impact of digital platforms on youth entrepreneurship and self-employment in Fes City, Morocco, focusing specifically on how digital tools reshape entrepreneurial practices and social interactions. To achieve this objective, a qualitative approach was adopted, combining focus groups and participatory observation. Data were collected from eight young entrepreneurs operating in various digital sectors—namely e-commerce, digital services, tourism, and traditional crafts—who were recruited through purposive sampling based on their digital entrepreneurship experience. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which allowed us to identify recurring patterns and themes. The results reveal that digital platforms facilitate communication with peers and customers, reduce startup costs, and enable access to wider markets. Testimonies from participants show that young entrepreneurs actively leverage social media (Facebook, Avito) for marketing, learning, and networking, and that digital transformation enables hybrid business models combining physical and online presence, thereby enhancing flexibility. In conclusion, digital platforms significantly support self-employment and entrepreneurial initiatives among youth in Fes. However, challenges such as digital inequality, legal gaps, and cybersecurity risks remain underexplored and require further investigation. This study contributes to digital sociology by illustrating how virtual entrepreneurship reshapes professional identities and social capital.

### Keywords:

Digital, Youth, Entrepreneurship, Startups, Self-Employment

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## Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped economic and social practices across the globe. Among the most significant transformations is the emergence of digital platforms as central arenas for entrepreneurial activity. These platforms – ranging from social media networks to e-commerce sites and freelance marketplaces – have lowered traditional barriers to market entry, enabling individuals to start businesses with limited capital and to reach customers beyond their immediate geographical surroundings. Young people, in particular, have been at the forefront of this shift, leveraging digital tools to create self-employment opportunities and innovative business models. However, despite growing scholarly interest in digital entrepreneurship, most existing research has focused on global or metropolitan contexts, leaving mid-sized cities such as Fes largely underexplored. Moreover, the literature tends to be either overly optimistic about the potential of digital platforms or purely descriptive, without identifying the specific mechanisms through which these platforms influence entrepreneurial behaviour.

In response to this gap, the present study investigates the impact of digital platforms on youth entrepreneurship and self-employment in Fes City, Morocco. Rather than asking whether digital platforms have an effect – a question that has already been answered affirmatively – this study seeks to understand how they exert that effect and under what conditions. Drawing on Pierre Mercklé's sociology of social networks and the Technology Acceptance Model, the research identifies three key mechanisms: low-cost access to customers, self-directed online learning, and the transformation of traditional businesses into hybrid offline/online models. At the same time, the study documents the challenges that accompany platform-based self-employment, including intense competition, digital inequality, and legal uncertainty, thereby offering a balanced and empirically grounded account.

The study is guided by two research questions. First, what specific mechanisms do young entrepreneurs in Fes use to benefit from digital platforms in their entrepreneurial activities? Second, how do digital platforms enable young entrepreneurs to overcome traditional barriers such as lack of startup capital, limited local market access, and insufficient professional networks? To answer these questions, a qualitative research design was adopted, combining focus groups and participatory observation with eight young entrepreneurs operating in various digital sectors in Fes. The findings provide empirical evidence from an under-researched context and contribute to the broader literature on digital sociology, youth entrepreneurship, and the changing nature of work in the digital age.

## The research problem

While digital platforms are widely believed to foster youth entrepreneurship and self-employment, most existing research remains either overly optimistic or purely descriptive, particularly in non-metropolitan contexts such as Fes City. The literature has largely failed to explain the specific mechanisms through which digital platforms influence entrepreneurial behaviour, nor does it clarify how young entrepreneurs use these platforms to overcome concrete barriers such as limited startup capital, restricted local markets, or a lack of professional networks. This study addresses these gaps by providing an empirical, qualitative investigation based on focus groups and participatory observation with eight young entrepreneurs in Fes. Drawing on Pierre Mercklé's sociology of social networks, the research identifies three key mechanisms: low-cost customer access, self-directed online learning, and the transformation of traditional businesses into hybrid (offline/online) models. At the same time, the study documents emerging challenges including digital inequality, intense competition, and legal uncertainty, which qualify the optimistic narrative surrounding platform-based self-employment.

**RQ1:** What specific mechanisms do young entrepreneurs in Fes use to benefit from digital platforms in their entrepreneurial activities?

**RQ2:** How do digital platforms enable young entrepreneurs to overcome traditional barriers such as a lack of startup capital, limited local market access, and insufficient professional networks?

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is particularly well-suited to the exploratory nature of the research questions. Given that the aim is to understand the mechanisms, experiences, and perceptions of young entrepreneurs rather than to measure statistical relationships, a qualitative approach allows for in-depth investigation of how digital platforms shape entrepreneurial practices in the specific context of Fes City. Two complementary qualitative techniques were employed: focus groups and participatory observation, following the principles of triangulation to enhance the credibility of the findings.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling, a strategy deliberately chosen to ensure that the individuals included in the study possessed relevant experience and could provide rich information on the phenomenon under investigation. Eight young entrepreneurs operating in Fes took part in the study. The selection criteria were as follows: active use of at least one digital platform (social media, e-commerce site, or freelance marketplace) for entrepreneurial purposes; a minimum of one year of experience in digital entrepreneurship; diversity of activity sectors, including technology and innovation, e-commerce, digital services, tourism, and traditional crafts transformed through digital tools; and willingness to participate in both a focus group discussion

and follow-up observation. The sample encompassed entrepreneurs aged between 22 and 44 years, with varying levels of education and prior business experience, which allowed the study to capture a range of perspectives rather than aiming for statistical representativeness.

Data were collected in two stages. First, a focus group was conducted with all eight participants, facilitated by the researcher using a semi-structured interview guide. The session lasted approximately two and a half hours. The guide was organised around three thematic axes: participants' experiences with digital platforms, perceived changes in their entrepreneurial practices due to digitalisation, and challenges encountered in platform-based self-employment. The focus group was audio-recorded with the consent of all participants and transcribed verbatim. Second, participatory observation was carried out over a period of two weeks following the focus group. During this phase, the researcher observed the online professional activities of the participants, including their use of social media for marketing, interactions with customers on digital platforms, and engagement with online forums or training sessions. Field notes were taken to record non-verbal cues, contextual details, and recurring practices that might not emerge from verbal accounts alone. This combination of focus group and observation allowed the study to cross-check self-reported behaviours against actual practices.

The analysis of the transcribed focus group data and the field notes followed the principles of thematic analysis. The coding was performed manually by the researcher.

Ethical considerations were respected throughout the research process. All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without negative consequences. Oral informed consent was obtained from each participant before data collection began. Data were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher. It should be acknowledged, however, that the small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings to other contexts. Nonetheless, the depth of qualitative data obtained provides rich insights into the mechanisms and challenges of digital entrepreneurship in a mid-sized city.

## The Study Concepts

**Digital World** is characterized by tremendous technological advancements and the emergence of a digital revolution, leading to a significant transformation in how humans interact with information and technology. This refers to the current period characterized by the widespread use and significant dominance of digital technologies in various aspects of daily life. This includes advancements in technology such as digitization, the internet, social media, and digital information processing (Boulier, 2019).

Digital Platforms are online gateways that allow users to create their social networks, interact with other users, exchange messages, share comments, and resources such as videos and audio files.

This enables the creation of a virtual community and the establishment of virtual social relationships. Social networking platforms are digital or virtual platforms specifically designed to facilitate communication between individuals. Users create unique profiles that represent their digital identities and interact with other users through virtual links and interactions, while social networks are often focused on personal relationships and interactions between individuals. On the other hand, digital platforms are social networks that allow users to share information and discuss various topics in various fields, which may include social networks but also encompass discussion forums, blogs, and other types of platforms that facilitate social interaction. Social platforms are broader and more structured than social networks and can include elements such as Telegram groups, major pages, and forums (Danah M. Boyd, Nicole B. Ellison, 2007).

**The Entrepreneur** is a topic of interest in sociology because it is related to the social factors that determine entrepreneurial behaviour (Versini, 2019). In sociological literature, definitions vary according to different theories, currents, and research. Therefore, research on entrepreneurs usually intersects in four dimensions. Firstly, there is, at least in the market economy, a category of economic actors who distinguish themselves from others by their ability to create and manage enterprises (Mercklé, 2011). Secondly, entrepreneurs are economic actors who take risks and are willing to invest their time and money in uncertain projects. Thirdly, entrepreneurs are economic actors capable of mobilizing resources, including financial, human, and social resources, to achieve their projects. Finally, entrepreneurs are economic actors capable of creating economic, social, and cultural value (Schumpeter, 1983). It should be noted that within the framework of this study, we consider an entrepreneur to be any individual who has established and manages their enterprise to provide specific services or products. The entrepreneur manages all aspects of their enterprise, including planning, organizing, marketing, financing, and monitoring. We will also focus on the digital entrepreneur, characterized by the ability to adapt to rapid digital transformations and take advantage of emerging opportunities in the digital technology era. By investing in technological solutions that improve efficiency and better serve the needs of customers and the market, entrepreneurs in this field aim to achieve innovation and success.

### **Digital as a Sociological Subject**

Digital sociology studies the effects of digital tools on culture, society, and interpersonal relationships, including social media, the internet, and digital media. It looks at how relationships, social norms, values, and human behaviour are affected by these technologies. It also investigates how technology affects human behaviour and social interactions (Boulier, 2019). Digital sociology includes internet sociology. It investigates how internet use affects social interactions, behaviour, and cultural shifts. This area of study aims to comprehend how society, behaviour, social connections, and identity are altered by the internet (Baya-Laffite, 2018).

Pierre Mercklé provides a clear method for studying social networks in his book "Sociology of Social Networks." He places more emphasis on interpersonal relationships than personal characteristics. He clarifies important concepts like social capital and friendship. He researches categories, groups, and social networks. In order to understand how technology impacts social life, he also examines online social networks. Mercklé cites Georg Simmel and other researchers. Simmel was a pioneer in the field of social interaction and group behaviour research (Simmel, 1999). Mercklé also cites Stanley Milgram, Jacob Moreno, and John Barnes (Mercklé, 2011) Barnes examined social roles and social structures in order to study social networks. He argued that social networks today are very important for social structures and roles. They facilitate easy interpersonal interaction and communication. This rapid communication fosters the development of new social groups and social relationships. Digital social groups that complement traditional social groups are joined by friends, family, and coworkers. These relationships have an impact on values and beliefs that alter people's perceptions of their social roles (Barnes, 1954).

Stanley Milgram's "six degrees of separation" experiment is well-known. It demonstrated how short links allow people to connect. Packages containing information about a distant person were distributed to experiment participants. A person they knew who lived closer to the target had to receive the package. The findings demonstrated that, on average, the package can be delivered to its destination with just six intermediaries. This experiment reinforced the idea that our social networks are more interconnected than we initially thought (Milgram, 1967). On the other hand, Jacob Moreno developed social measurement, a method for mapping social relationships and analysing interactions within social groups. Moreno built and tested a technique for social measurement aimed at better understanding social relationships and dynamics. By collecting and analysing data, researchers and social scientists can see the links between group members and the effects that may result from these relationships (Moreno, 1954).

Some studies suggest that digital development has enhanced social connections. Under the influence of the internet, the structure of relationships between components of the social order has been restructured to provide greater opportunities for creating and maintaining communication with geographically distant individuals, as well as selective links based on shared interests (Granjon, 2011). Connected individuals tend to maintain long-distance ties and build local connections, indicating that the social capital gap has significantly widened between these two groups. This can be interpreted as reflecting the evolution of individuals' interactions with their social environment (Hampton, K. N., & Wellman, B, 1999). Other research, however, concludes the opposite, suggesting that carefully nurtured online communications may replace strong local ties and contribute specifically to the weakening of local civic engagement and the erosion of strong ties outside the internet, thereby reducing opportunities for traditional forms of communication (Quan-Haase, A., & Wellman, B, 2004).

## Digital Platforms and Self-Employment Opportunities

Digital transformation is now unavoidable. It changes society and public policies by forcing new choices, as social, political, and economic actors have been impacted by the rapid advancement of technology (Lévy, M., & Jouyet, J.-P, 2006). The foundation of this era is digital networks. They serve as the primary means of communication and information exchange. Numerous hardware and software components that transfer data between systems are part of these networks. They facilitate communication and provide rapid information access (Ventolini, 2006). Finding jobs that match their skills is a challenge for many young people. Digital platforms aim to address this by providing unemployed youth with an engaging, hands-on environment in which they can develop their skills.

We live in a digital age characterised by rapid technological advancement. People's lives, particularly those of unemployed youth, are shaped by digital platforms. These platforms and technologies are essential for assisting young people in beginning their own projects. According to John Maynard Keynes, technology advances more quickly than employment opportunities (Aghion, P., & Howitt, P, 1994). This indicates that long-term benefits like efficiency, new products, markets, and jobs outweigh any short-term job losses brought on by technology (Ibid).

As society changes, digital platforms have a significant impact on the lives of unemployed youth. They create new avenues for self-employment and alter how people interact with society. The ease of online learning that these platforms provide is one obvious example. This gives young people the skills they need in a rapidly changing labour market.

*"I learned from YouTube stars before I started my online marketing. I learned the basics of digital marketing, how to get people interested in my products, and how to make ads for them. I learned how to edit videos by watching online tutorials and got paid software for free through a forum. When I was good enough, I sold my services to other digital marketers who paid me." (Kamal from Fes, 38 years old)*

Digital platforms enable users to communicate, build friendships, and establish business connections. They change how we connect by removing limits on time and place (Mercklé, 2011). Young people can also start businesses on digital platforms, easily sharing their thoughts and creating new things.

These platforms also allow users to work on small projects and as freelancers. This aligns with the concept of the "sharing economy," in which goods are created and exchanged, thereby altering work and the economy. Although the literature is limited, most studies suggest that digital technology will eventually improve employment outcomes, with both positive and negative effects such as increased productivity, reduced expenses, and new markets (Fischer, E., & Reuber, A. R, 2014).

People's perspectives on work are altered by digital platforms. One can search for jobs worldwide and work from any location. There are various ways to communicate with clients and coworkers. This makes work more flexible and interesting, opening new opportunities for individuals and society. Self-employment is key in this context. Using digital tools to grow skills, learn more, and build networks helps individuals adapt and stay competitive in a changing job market. In the context of the contemporary economy and society, rapid technological advancements serve as a driving force for deeply understanding the concept of self-employment. Individuals can now act as clients, innovators, and operators simultaneously, enhancing their role as active members in the digital economy. This enables economic actors to be part of a society that relies on digital interaction and technological advancements, thus contributing to building a future based on digital transformation and self-employment, as the employment effects are mostly positive (Spath, D., et al, 2023).

## **The Digital Platforms and the Evolution of Entrepreneurial Work**

Contemporary societies are living in an era of widespread digital technology, where digital platforms have become indispensable in the fabric of daily life, especially in the field of entrepreneurship and business. The questions raised about the impact of these platforms on the fundamental nature of entrepreneurial work open up a wide horizon for exploring future transformations that may completely reshape the field of entrepreneurship. Therefore, this study asks how entrepreneurs' orientation towards these platforms is shaping a transformation in the economic and social dynamics of entrepreneurship, and how that affects the future formation of the economy, commerce, industry, and service transactions.

### **1. From Classical Entrepreneurship to Virtual Entrepreneurship**

Alain Fayolle defines entrepreneurship as a state characterized by the creation of economic and social wealth, and it is characterized by a risk-taking nature. In this approach, entrepreneurship includes individuals who must be prepared to face challenges and exhibit behaviours that distinguish them in interacting with the business environment, where they must think futuristically, take effective initiative, and intervene individually to overcome difficulties. Fayolle emphasizes the importance of these individuals' ability to intelligently bear risks and make effective decisions to achieve success in the context of entrepreneurship (Fayolle, 2003).

Joseph Schumpeter defines entrepreneurship by focusing on the innovative characteristics of the entrepreneur and considers the entrepreneur as the agent who creates and renews within entrepreneurship. He believes that the entrepreneur is capable of organizing individuals, resources, and modern technologies in order to achieve new profits and benefits (Brémond, J., & Geledan, A, 1983). In this context, the introduction of information and communication technologies into entrepreneurial organizations, especially in the early 21st century, has been a source of great excitement within the academic and professional community. This has led to numerous studies on

various aspects related to the integration of information and communication technologies in organizational and entrepreneurial environments. With the development of the digital age, it seems that digitization has replaced the concept of information and communication technology in the field of entrepreneurship, indicating the establishment of communication and work tools known as collaboration (social media, virtual forums, document sharing platforms, etc.) (Benedetto-Meyer, M. & Klein, N, 2017). In the midst of the rapid digital revolution, the entrepreneurial scene is undergoing a major transformation from the traditional classical entrepreneurship model to digital innovation and virtual entrepreneurship.

Before commencing our analysis, it is worth noting that the virtual world refers to social communities that emerge on the web when a sufficient number of individuals engage in prolonged general discussions, imbued with human emotions, with the aim of forming networks of personal relationships in the virtual space (Rheingold, 1993). "Virtual" originates from the Latin words *virtualis* and *virtus*, meaning that which is in power, that which is not present, that which is immaterial, that which contradicts actual existence (Lévy, 1995). The virtual world is characterized by its detachment from the present and place. As mentioned earlier, the common understanding views the virtual world, which cannot be physically touched, as something that complements tangible reality. In this context, there is an important indication that should not be ignored: the virtual world is often "non-existent in terms of place." Its elements move and disperse, and the significance of its geographical location has greatly diminished (Lévy, 1995). The transition from classical entrepreneurship to digital entrepreneurship entails significant sociological transformations. In classical entrepreneurship, professional relationships were often hierarchical, relying on a traditional organizational structure. In contrast, in digital enterprises, these relationships become more horizontal and flexible, enhancing direct communication and decision-making in a manner different from classical entrepreneurship.

*"I have a commercial store for selling leather products that I inherited from my father. When I had to stop working during the Corona period, I turned to online sales, and I started taking pictures of the products and displaying them on Facebook. At first, the response was weak, and I used to advertise our products on several buy-and-sell pages. Thank God, we were able to sell something better than sitting idle. After the pandemic period, we started relying on both in-store sales and e-commerce, with customers from the city and buyers from other cities. Honestly, our entry into the digital world of commerce has been a great gain for the prosperity of our business." (Abdellah, traditional craftsman, 44 years old)*

In the context of digital development, professional identity has also undergone redefinition. In the past, it was associated with a specific place and a hierarchical organizational structure, whereas now identity is defined more through individual skills and contributions to the project and professional network online. With digital entrepreneurship, work flexibility and the potential for work-life balance have expanded. Employees and workers can work remotely, which changes

family relationships and the dynamics of the workplace, and the balance between work and personal life. The shift to digital projects has also made skill and education development crucial, requiring the acquisition of digital competencies and constant adaptation to new technologies. This has changed training and educational models to encourage more autonomy. Since digital inequality may cause some workers to be marginalized while others may benefit from adjusting to virtual environments, digital entrepreneurship offers both opportunities and challenges for social integration. Thus, the shift to digital entrepreneurship goes beyond changes to organisational structures; it also has a significant impact on social interactions.

## 2. Digital Entrepreneurship and the Evolution of Entrepreneurial Work

Digital entrepreneurship is becoming a key part of shaping the future of business and innovation in this time of rapid digital change. The shift of entrepreneurial work toward digitization connects technology and entrepreneurship, creating many new opportunities and challenges to explore. Digital evolution has fostered entrepreneurship by lowering barriers to e-commerce for young people, giving access to information, leveraging social media, and making operations more efficient. This reflects the logic of commercial orientation that began to emerge in the 1980s, as entrepreneurs sought to adapt to diverse, volatile, and unpredictable demand (Benghozi, 1998).

Digital technology also offers a range of opportunities for improving business operations. It encompasses all technological means, from smartphones to computers, greatly facilitating the management, sharing, and utilization of digital information. In this context, the use of big data and smart data analysis stands out as the ability to better understand market needs and consumer behaviour. Entrepreneurs seek to improve their knowledge of the evolving supply and demand market for their target products by creating large databases that record customer feedback and suggestions (Hetzel, 2004) Information exchange platforms, review sites, and social media change how entrepreneurs talk to their audience. Digital forums, social media, and review sites let customers share their opinions, experiences, and information about products and services clearly (Benedetto-Meyer, M. & Klein, N, 2017). This helps entrepreneurs reach markets they could not reach before and adapt quickly to changes in global market demand. Managing customer feedback is very important for any business, and digital tools facilitate this. Business owners can sell their goods and services online to people all over the world and communicate with them at any time. This provides more choices for both new and established businesses, helping them grow and innovate.

*Fatima Zahra (a 25-year-old university student) says: "I was a student coming from the city of Taounate, and I couldn't get a scholarship. I was skilled in making traditional necklaces, bracelets, and embroidery on fabric, and I sold them to my friends at university on demand. I didn't have enough capital to rent a shop and start a business, so I tried making and selling them through the Avito platform. At first, I didn't sell enough products*

*until a friend at university advised me to use paid Facebook advertisements. When I started using them, I was able to get orders from outside the city, and the number of sales increased. I developed my business by importing products from Chinese websites and selling them on my Facebook page."*

Digital entrepreneurship requires lower costs compared to traditional entrepreneurship. Many necessary resources can be accessed through the web, either for free or at a low cost. For example, online advertising is free or less expensive than traditional advertising campaigns; websites and digital platforms can be created for free; digital products can be distributed; and marketing through social media can be done at a low cost. This has made entrepreneurial work more flexible for a wide range of young people, encouraging innovation and enabling entrepreneurs with limited budgets to compete on an equal footing with more established companies.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study offer empirical insights into the mechanisms through which digital platforms influence youth entrepreneurship and self-employment in a mid-sized city, Fes, thereby contributing to the growing body of literature on digital sociology and entrepreneurial practices in non-metropolitan contexts. The first mechanism identified is low-cost access to customers. Fatima Zahra's case provides a particularly clear illustration: a university student without startup capital, she used Facebook advertisements and the Avito platform to sell handmade crafts and later imported products. This finding echoes the predictions of the Technology Acceptance Model, in which perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness drive the adoption of digital tools, and it demonstrates how digital platforms reduce the traditional requirement for physical retail space – a constraint that Schumpeter (1983) identified as a central risk for classical entrepreneurs. In the digital age, risk is no longer primarily financial; it shifts to the ability to navigate algorithmic visibility, platform policies, and online competition.

A second mechanism is self-directed online learning. Kamal's trajectory from YouTube tutorials to paid freelance services exemplifies this process. He learned digital marketing and video editing through free online resources, then sold his services to other digital marketers. This finding supports Fischer and Reuber's (2014) argument that digital technologies create new employment opportunities by enabling informal skill acquisition and peer-based certification. It also aligns with what Benghozi (1998) called the "new commercial logic", in which entrepreneurs adapt rapidly to volatile demand by leveraging digital tools for just-in-time learning and reputation building. Moreover, the emergence of specialised forums and open courses functions as a space where practical knowledge becomes a tradable asset across traditional boundaries, confirming Pierre Mercklé's (2011) analysis that digital ties are no longer confined to fixed geographical locations or predetermined social roles.

The third mechanism is the transformation of traditional businesses into hybrid offline/online models. Abdellah's experience of converting his father's traditional leather shop into a dual physical-digital business illustrates this shift. His ability to reach customers beyond Fes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic confirms what Hampton and Wellman (1999) observed: digitally connected individuals maintain long-distance ties while reinforcing local connections, thereby expanding their social capital in ways previously unavailable to small-scale artisans. This finding also resonates with Pierre Lévy's (1995) conceptualisation of the virtual as "detached from presence and place", where geographical proximity is no longer a prerequisite for commercial exchange. However, the findings also show that this unbinding is not absolute; participants still relied on local networks for initial trust and word-of-mouth referrals before expanding online. Thus, rather than replacing local ties, digital platforms complement and extend them – a nuanced conclusion that qualifies both the optimistic and pessimistic poles of the debate.

Regarding the extent to which digital platforms enable young entrepreneurs to overcome traditional barriers, the findings provide strong evidence that platforms reduce barriers such as lack of startup capital, limited local market access, and insufficient professional networks – but only partially and unevenly. Lack of capital was circumvented by all three participants through low-cost or free digital tools, challenging classical economic assumptions that entrepreneurship requires significant upfront investment (Aghion & Howitt, 1994) and supporting the view that digital platforms democratise access to entrepreneurial opportunities, at least in the initial stages. Limited local market access was overcome through geographical unbinding, as Abdellah sold to buyers from other cities and Fatima Zahra received orders from outside Fes. Insufficient professional networks were addressed through online peer interactions and influencer-led learning; Kamal explicitly mentioned learning from "YouTube stars" and joining forums where he obtained free software. This aligns with Mercklé's (2011) emphasis on the fluidity of contemporary social ties. Unlike classical entrepreneurship, where networks were often inherited or built through face-to-face interactions over long periods, digital entrepreneurship allows for the rapid assembly of weak ties that can be mobilised for specific tasks. Yet the study also reveals that these weak ties require active curation and digital literacy skills that are not evenly distributed.

While the findings confirm the enabling potential of digital platforms, they also document several challenges that qualify the optimistic narrative. Participants reported intense competition, digital inequality, and legal uncertainty. From a theoretical perspective, these findings support the cautionary view of Quan-Haase and Wellman (2004), who argued that carefully nurtured online communications may weaken strong local ties and reduce civic engagement. Although our participants did not report such weakening, the intense competition they face suggests that platform-based self-employment is not a guaranteed pathway to stable income. Moreover, the digital divide remains a structural constraint: young people in rural or low-income areas may lack the basic digital skills or infrastructure to benefit equally. This study, conducted in Fes – a mid-

sized city with relatively good connectivity – may therefore underestimate the barriers faced by more marginalised populations.

This study makes three main contributions. First, it provides empirical evidence from an under-researched context (a mid-sized Moroccan city) that digital platforms enable youth entrepreneurship through specific, identifiable mechanisms. Second, it demonstrates that these mechanisms are not merely economic but also social and cognitive, involving learning, network building, and identity transformation. Third, it qualifies the prevailing optimistic discourse by documenting emerging challenges that require further investigation. Nevertheless, the study has limitations. The small sample size restricts generalisability, and the qualitative design does not allow for statistical testing of the prevalence of the identified mechanisms. Furthermore, the study focused primarily on successful cases, potentially overlooking entrepreneurs who failed to benefit from digital platforms. Future research should employ mixed methods with larger, more diverse samples, including rural youth and those who have abandoned digital entrepreneurship. Longitudinal studies would also help assess the long-term sustainability of platform-dependent self-employment.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to investigate the impact of digital platforms on youth entrepreneurship and self-employment in Fes City, moving beyond purely descriptive accounts to identify the specific mechanisms through which digital tools shape entrepreneurial practices. Drawing on a qualitative research design that combined focus groups and participatory observation with eight young entrepreneurs, the study addressed two main research questions: the mechanisms of platform-based benefit, and the extent to which these platforms enable young entrepreneurs to overcome traditional barriers such as lack of capital, limited local markets, and insufficient professional networks.

The findings reveal three interconnected mechanisms. First, low-cost access to customers, illustrated by Fatima Zahra's use of Facebook advertisements and the Avito platform, which allowed her to start a business with no initial capital. Second, self-directed online learning, exemplified by Kamal's acquisition of digital marketing and video editing skills through YouTube tutorials and specialised forums, which he later monetised as freelance services. Third, the transformation of traditional businesses into hybrid offline/online models, as demonstrated by Abdellah, who converted his father's leather shop into a dual physical-digital enterprise, thereby reaching customers beyond Fes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. These mechanisms enabled participants to overcome startup capital constraints, expand their market reach beyond the local geography, and build professional networks through weak ties and peer-based learning.

At the same time, the study documents several challenges that qualify the optimistic narrative surrounding platform-based self-employment. Participants reported intense competition, digital

inequality (particularly in terms of skills and infrastructure), and legal uncertainty regarding the status of freelancers and online entrepreneurs. These challenges suggest that while digital platforms lower entry barriers, they do not guarantee stable or sustainable income. Moreover, the digital divide remains a structural constraint that may exclude young people in rural or low-income areas from benefiting equally. The study also acknowledges its limitations: the small sample size restricts generalisability, and the qualitative design does not permit statistical testing of the prevalence of the identified mechanisms. Furthermore, the focus on relatively successful cases may have overlooked entrepreneurs who failed to benefit from digital platforms.

In light of these findings, this study makes three main contributions. First, it provides empirical evidence from an under-researched context – a mid-sized Moroccan city – that digital platforms enable youth entrepreneurship through specific, identifiable mechanisms rather than through vague or general effects. Second, it demonstrates that these mechanisms are not merely economic but also social and cognitive, involving learning, network building, and identity transformation. Third, it qualifies the prevailing optimistic discourse by documenting emerging challenges that require further investigation, thus offering a more balanced and realistic understanding of platform-dependent self-employment.

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