CALL FOR PAPERS
Special Issue of Small Business Economics: An Entrepreneurship Journal
Start-ups in the digital context: Performance outcomes
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Guest Editors

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Background and Focus of the Special Issue

Digital technologies are receiving increasing attention from entrepreneurial scholars. This sub-stream in entrepreneurship research, particularly digital entrepreneurship, has been witnessing a flurry of new studies as scholars conceptualize entrepreneurship in the digital context through the digital entrepreneurial ecosystem comprising digital infrastructure, governance, digital user citizenship, digital entrepreneurship and the digital marketplace (Sussan & Acs, 2017); or delineate the nature of digital technologies as digital artifacts, platforms and infrastructure, providing opportunities, venues and support for entrepreneurship (Nambisan, 2017). This call seeks to add to this work, by exploring the performance implications of the digital context and technologies for start-ups, and the internal and external contextual factors that contribute to the success or failure of these ‘young firms’, which remains under-explored (Acs, Stam, Audretsch, & O’Connor, 2017; Cusumano, 2017; Nambisan, 2017; Täuscher & Kietzmann, 2017).

With the exception of global giants and leading players such as Uber, Airbnb and Lyft, who have achieved rapid growth and high valuations reflected in their so-called Unicorn status and are subject to empirical and theoretical research (e.g. Acs et al., 2017; Lin, Wang, & Wu, 2017; Stemler, 2017), our understanding of start-ups in the sharing economy – otherwise referred to as the collaborative, peer or platform economy – is quite limited (Acs et al., 2017). This is despite the fact that information technology, entrepreneurship, and venture capital has led to the development of hundreds of new ventures in recent years with similar business models (Täuscher & Kietzmann, 2017), as smartphone apps, cloud-based servers, and GPS
technology make sharing services easy to launch and use (Cusumano, 2017). For example, Angel.co, a marketplace for startups and investors, currently lists over 1,345 startups in the sharing economy space (Angel.co, 2018). Yet as pointed out recently by Sussan and Acs (2017), the literature has not investigated these start-ups (Daunfeldt & Halvarsson, 2015) despite the fact that developing a business App is one of the most common types of business start-up today (Haeffliger, Jäger, & Von Krogh, 2010). While the sharing economy is creating an array of new venture opportunities (Acs et al., 2017), anecdotal evidence suggests that many sharing-economy ventures appear to be small, losing money, and surviving on venture capital (Block, Colombo, Cumming, & Vismara, 2018; Cusumano, 2017) or going out of business.

Start-ups and young firms in general are also expected to lead to the creation of new jobs and economic growth (Calvino, Criscuolo, & Menon, 2015; Fritsch & Mueller, 2008), although only a small proportion of new firms account for most of the employment growth (Davis, Haltiwanger, & Schuh, 1996). Moreover, there is growing recognition that the digital revolution enables firms to be more productive through innovation but with significantly fewer workers (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2013; Brynjolfsson E. & A., 2010). Thus, the extent to which start-ups in the digital context contribute to employment growth and are ‘job machines’ (Fryges, Müller, & Niefert, 2014) is unclear. While the platform economy is generating a range of entrepreneurial opportunities, whether these opportunities translate into new ventures driving employment and productivity growth or merely exist to provide their founder/s with a source of employment and income is an open question (Kenney & Zysman, 2015) – and indeed, raises additional research questions about the strategic objectives of these new, digital ventures.

However we also highlight that start-ups are not confined to platform venues (Nambisan, 2017), as the digital (e.g., artefacts and infrastructure) phenomena, particularly the so-called IT megatrends or SMAC technologies – social, mobile, analytics, and cloud computing – are adopted and used in wider organizational contexts and are affecting and transforming processes, products, services, and business models, as well as creating opportunities for disruptive start-ups (Legner et al., 2017).

Thus there is a substantial gap in our understanding of start-ups in the digital context (Acs et al., 2017; Sussan & Acs, 2017) leading us to call for more empirical and conceptual research in order to improve our understanding of the start-up phenomena – including in, but not limited to the sharing economy. The purpose of this call is to begin to examine start-ups in the digital context, focusing on their performance outcomes – including financial and non-financial performance measures – and the internal (e.g., entrepreneurial self-efficacy and orientation, human capital, heterogeneity/size of entrepreneurial team characteristics, R&D, innovation etc) and external contextual (e.g., ecosystem/actors, networks, institutions and networks, financial capital, high- or low-technology industries, emerging or established economies etc) factors that contribute to the success or failure of start-ups.

Such empirical and theoretical work has the potential to add to the development of an emerging body of knowledge on a specific category of entrepreneurial firms – start-ups in the digital context (Acs et al., 2017). Research should provide empirical evidence and/or theoretical explanations on internal and/or external factors that explain heterogeneous firm performance outcomes, including the achievement of economic goals (e.g., financial performance, survival rates, growth trajectories, job creation) and non-financial performance indicators of operational effectiveness (e.g., technical excellence, competitive capabilities, productivity, and export performance). In doing so, this research will begin to contribute to explaining why some
new firms in the digital context succeed whereas others hardly grow or exit in an early stage. Papers could focus on (but are not limited to) the following questions:

1. What digital technologies and internal and/or external contextual factors influence start-up success/failure?
2. To what extent, and how, does human and/or social capital contribute to performance outcomes of start-ups in the digital context?
3. To what extent, and how, do digital start-ups differ in performance outcomes across industrial sectors?
4. What performance challenges and opportunities does the digital phenomena raise for start-ups?
5. To what extent, and how, are ‘born digital’ start-ups more successful than traditional businesses that later digitize?
6. To what extent are, and how do, start-ups engage with external actors using digital technologies to improve their performance outcomes?
7. What is the role of open innovation in explaining performance outcomes of start-ups in the digital context?
8. What are the key resources or capabilities start-ups acquire and/or develop to succeed in the platform economy?
9. To what extent are start-ups in the platform economy transforming industries outside of the oft-cited ride sharing and accommodation sectors?
10. To what extent are startups in the platform economy job machines?
11. What is the impact of platform economy business models upon business growth and other performance outcomes amongst start-ups?
12. What approaches, services and techniques can start-ups use to orchestrate digital interactions regionally and/or globally to become successful?
13. How do start-ups manage opportunistic behaviours arising from digital interactions with external actors and thus protect and/or appropriate value?
14. How do start-ups identify and leverage digital technologies and services to drive performance outcomes?
15. To what extent are success factors previously identified in the start-up literature relevant to start-ups in the digital context?

**Paper submission procedure**

Submissions to the special issue should be submitted to Graciela Corral de Zubielqui (graciela.corraldezubielqui@adelaide.edu.au) by October 31st, 2018. All submissions will be subject to the standard review process followed by *Small Business Economics: An Entrepreneurship Journal*. All manuscripts must be original, unpublished works that are not concurrently under review for publication elsewhere. All submissions should conform to the SBEJ manuscript submission guidelines.

**References**


