The Influence of Digital Platforms on Entrepreneurship in Trinidad and Tobago: Examining the Complexities of Technology Affordances and Constraints

Report: Research Findings & Recommendations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digital platforms which are used by entrepreneurs globally have changed the way many Trinidad and Tobago entrepreneurs interact. However, while it is commonly accepted that digital platforms change the processes and practices of entrepreneurs, their influence on entrepreneurship is insufficiently examined and understood. At the time of this research, the COVID-19 global pandemic was not yet a reality and the prospect of living and working in a physically distanced world was not on our radar. With an anticipated rise in unemployment, and higher dependence on digital technology, and e-commerce, understanding the best way to develop and use digital platforms for entrepreneurship locally is now critical. This research is timely as it asks questions about the influence of digital platforms on entrepreneurship in Trinidad and Tobago and provides insights that can inform the development of frameworks to support and grow e-commerce ecosystems and initiatives. The problem is that existing research tends to focus on developed countries and high-growth entrepreneurship, and this leaves a gap in our understanding of low-growth entrepreneurship, which represents most entrepreneurial activity. Trinidad and Tobago is classified as a high-income country by the World Bank, ranked above average on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), a measure of human development using indicators such as life expectancy, health, knowledge, and standard of living, yet is continuously categorised as a developing state by the United Nations. Notably, the country is attempting to diversify its oil and gas economy through supporting entrepreneurship.

The study began with a pilot study followed by interviews and focus groups with entrepreneurs and entrepreneur stakeholders and the use of secondary data. Platforms used by entrepreneurs in the study are diverse and include multifaceted social media platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube), messaging platforms (such as WhatsApp) e-commerce platforms (such as Amazon, Shopify), gig-economy platforms (such as Uber), payment platforms (such as PayPal) and e-learning platforms (such as FutureLearn). Locally created platforms are also studied. The research provides insight into a country with low levels of high-growth entrepreneurship but high levels of opportunity-driven entrepreneurship, and relatively good levels of internet access, and telecommunications infrastructure. It sheds light on entrepreneurship in a twin-island state, and a multi-cultural society, with a distinctive creative sector and an informal, fragmented entrepreneurial ecosystem. Its major findings highlight the extent to which historical, socio-economic, and cultural forces comprise both drivers and barriers to entrepreneurial activities and outcomes in Trinidad and Tobago. It concludes that increased visibility on digital platforms and online collaboration are helpful but insufficient because offline social interaction and networks are essential for entrepreneurs. Importantly, as well, the research examines the merits and limits of digital communication and online learning, and unpacks the potential for the development of locally created digital platforms and services when entrepreneurs tap into deep-seated local culture and historical knowledge about the environment within which they operate and make the best use of resources available.
The study also examines why online payment has had limited success for local entrepreneurs, while a billion dollars of goods are bought overseas online annually in Trinidad and Tobago. It explores the difficulties entrepreneurs face with copying, distraction and manipulation even though benefiting from the visibility, ease and speed that come with digital platform use. It found that when entrepreneurs use digital platforms, the benefits gained are in tension with platform rules that continuously change creating uncertainty, unpredictability and risk. Technology affordances and constraints, vary by degree, coexist and intertwine with culture, social norms and historically situated economic structures to both support and limit the potential for entrepreneurs to use digital platforms and capitalise on their benefits. This report summarises the research and provides recommendations to the Trinidad and Tobago government which should help them to understand the influence and limits of digital platforms as they seek to support and grow entrepreneurship in general and e-commerce in particular. For entrepreneurs, it provides recommendations that allow for a deeper understanding of how they may use and create digital platforms successfully.
ABOUT THE STUDY

Though digital platforms can make entrepreneurship different (Autio et al., 2017), we do not yet fully know in what way (Nambisan et al., 2019). This lack of understanding is in part due to the tendency to focus on high-growth entrepreneurship (Welter et al., 2016). However, understanding digital platform influence is essential for governments to develop entrepreneurship policies that can improve the economy, for academics to better understand mechanisms of entrepreneurship and for entrepreneurs who want to understand how best to use digital platforms to support their entrepreneurial efforts. This research examines the interactions and relationships between digital platforms and entrepreneurs in their environment. It goes beyond the tendency to pay attention to either socio-economic or digital influences on an entrepreneur. The study explains how Trinidad and Tobago entrepreneurs use digital platforms to shape their environment and how digital platform use shape their environment to understand and explain the influence of digital platforms on entrepreneurship in Trinidad and Tobago.

Objectives

1. To utilise Technology Affordances and Constraints Theory to understand and explain the relationships between digital platforms and entrepreneurship in Trinidad and Tobago.
2. To provide recommendations to entrepreneurs and policy recommendations to the Trinidad and Tobago government based on the assessment of the aforementioned relationship.

Research Questions

1. How have digital platforms influenced entrepreneurship in Trinidad and Tobago?
   1(a) How are digital platforms used in interactions between entrepreneurs, customers, and stakeholders?
   1(b) Have digital platforms played a role in changing the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Trinidad and Tobago?
   1(c) What affordances and constraints exist for entrepreneurs in Trinidad and Tobago in the context of digital platform use?

This study is based on a pilot study (encompassing 6 in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs that use digital platforms), (b) fifty-nine (59) semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs that use digital platforms, representatives from the Trinidad and Tobago entrepreneurial ecosystem, including government, finance, academia, the technical community and business support providers; (c) 2 focus groups, 1 consisting of 4 individuals that are both entrepreneurs and stakeholders in Tobago and the
other consisting of 8 entrepreneurs based in Southern Trinidad, and (d) secondary data from reports and the digital platforms used by entrepreneurs.

For the purposes of this study an entrepreneur refers to an individual that makes ‘any attempt at ... business or ... venture creation, such as self-employment, a new business organization, or the expansion of an existing business, by an individual, a team of individuals, or an established business’ (Reynolds et al., 1999, p. 3). While this definition focuses on new business or new venture creation (businesses under 3 1/2 years) (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2018), this research expands the type of entrepreneurship under study to include entrepreneurs whose businesses have existed for more than 3 1/2 years old. This definition is not digitally centred but is sufficiently broad so varied ways of using digital platforms for entrepreneurship in a broader context can be explored.

The theory and method of Technology Affordances and Constraints (TACT) was adopted for this research

‘technology affordance refers to an action potential, that is, to what an individual or organization with a particular purpose can do with a technology or information system; technology constraint refers to ways in which an individual or organization can be held back from accomplishing a particular goal when using a technology or system’ (Majchrzak and Markus 2014b, p. 833).

The type of technology under focus in this study is the digital platform, which is a virtual place, facilitating connections that support the exchange of information, products and services between two or more types of participant groups (Evans and Schmalensee, 2016, Gillespie, 2010, Helmond, 2015, Van Dijck, 2013). The types of digital platforms studied were informed by the platforms entrepreneurs said that they used. This included primarily social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, e-commerce platforms such as Amazon and Shopify, the messaging platform WhatsApp, the gig-economy platform Uber, and payment platforms such as PayPal. Other types of platforms that were used included e-learning platforms offering Massive Open Online Courses such as FutureLearn. These were not all of the platforms identified but represent the types of platforms found to be most popular. Some of the interviewees were also creators of local digital platforms and other local platforms used are incorporated.
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This examination of digital platform interaction and relationships in the context of culture and the socioeconomic environment has uncovered new information about the impact that digital platforms have had on entrepreneurs in Trinidad and Tobago. The study reveals the importance of historically situated social, cultural and economic factors on the ability to use digital platforms for entrepreneurship (Dy et al., 2018). The study provides new insight into how digital platforms influence entrepreneurs and the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Trinidad and Tobago. The research is of further importance given that it examines the relationship in a multi-cultural, twin-island Caribbean country that is attempting to diversify its economy away from a dependence on oil and gas through its support for entrepreneurship (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2016). Given the country has low levels of high-growth entrepreneurship, but relatively good levels of internet access and digital platform usage the findings provide valuable insight into how high-income does not correlate with high-growth entrepreneurship. Instead, what is revealed is that a country’s social and cultural characteristics, history and political economy can be vital for the development of entrepreneurship and an EE (John and Storr, 2018).

The study also provides valuable insight into the growth of the creative sector in both developing and developed countries. For example, the creative sector is said to account for a significant degree of employment in European countries (Boix-Domènech and Rausell-Köster, 2018), and its growth has also been aided by the use of digital technology (Tsang, 2015). The general literature as well as the views expressed by the research participants revealed that the creative sector is considered necessary for the development of entrepreneurship in T&T and so the ways that entrepreneurs can navigate digital platforms to support this, especially given high rates of copying online stood out. Most entrepreneurship in T&T is historically characterised as informal, and most entrepreneurs are micro-entrepreneurs. Given digital platforms are supporting an increase in informal or micro-entrepreneurship in developed countries (Martin, 2016) this research provides valuable insights for those studying this phenomenon in developed countries as well.

The research has revealed several factors that influence the interaction between entrepreneurs and digital platforms. The use of digital platforms is heavily influenced by the specificities of the local culture and social norms that preference face-to-face interaction, even when communication takes place online. Offline social capital (Gedajlovic et al., 2013) was found to be incredibly important for entrepreneurs to make the best use of digital platforms. Some entrepreneurs try to separate their

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2 For example, the internet bandwidth per user (Bits) in T&T is higher (approximately one hundred and eighty-two thousand and eight hundred and eight) than the average in the Americas, (ninety-one thousand) and the approximate percentage of individuals using the internet (seventy-three percent) is also above the average for the Americas (sixty-four percent) (International Telecommunications Union 2017a).
personal and professional interaction; however, this proves to be difficult as some platforms, especially social media platforms, discourage this action or because informal rules of the digital platform, as well as social norms, may require that entrepreneurs provide personal information about themselves to build trust with users.

Additionally, interaction is characterised by high levels of trial and error because the platforms often make changes that entrepreneurs need to adapt to quickly. Interaction, therefore, requires exceptionally high levels of adaptability and creativity for entrepreneurs to achieve their goals. Entrepreneurs must be able to make use of the potential of digital platforms to recombine ideas and information (Yoo et al., 2010) to leverage copying instead of being overcome by it. Distraction also infiltrates digital platform interactions as digital platforms employ tactics to keep entrepreneurs using their platforms. Additionally, psychological manipulation and or deceptive schemes are manifested as entrepreneurs continually try to find ways to meet their goals by employing schemes to overcome the lack of control they have over users and continually changing digital platforms that are constantly trying to control their behavior. This type of interaction relates to dealing with competition, dealing with new platform rules, or averting the negative outcome of unwanted user behaviour.

Importantly, the study also explains how digital platforms function as actors in the entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) and how they connect various EE pillars and components enabling the flow of resources from outside of the EE in a highly networked and interrelated way. It reveals a fragmented EE with networks based on family, ethnicity and location. Digital platforms have had an impact on certain components of the EE, like access to supplies or learning but the EE has not impacted on an entrepreneur’s ability to source funding or finance, which is vital for other components like sourcing human knowledge, skills and expertise to grow a business. While it appears to have supported access to international networks, these social ties though helpful seemed weak, if not backed up by a trusted relationship or some level of face-to-face familiarity or correspondence.

Digital platforms appear to have a limited impact on access to important information and local networks needed for business growth though they help them to more easily start a business, reach international customers and overcome barriers erected by some actors in the EE. Digital platforms tend to support entrepreneurs who are already a part of valuable offline networks to grow their businesses through online engagement. The platforms support communication for informal mentorship with others particularly overseas and inspire micro-entrepreneurship and new business ventures but they appear to have had limited influence on formal mentoring, for reasons such as mentors expecting to be paid or being reluctant to share information.

Some entrepreneurs that use digital platforms may work independently of government, because their interests and needs do not align with government support and may even conflict. Though some stakeholders believed that entrepreneurs needed a global and export-oriented mindset this research
found, as with other studies (World Economic Forum, 2013) that many entrepreneurs already possessed this mindset and believed they lacked support to fulfil their growth and international ambitions. Further, while digital platforms support entrepreneurial activities by helping entrepreneurs to source goods and services from overseas online, they may also inhibit government policy in this area as they can discourage the purchase of goods and services locally and limit tax revenue. The use of digital platforms, therefore, may at once support entrepreneurs and impede government efforts to develop entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, the study also confirms that intimate knowledge of local culture provides an opportunity for entrepreneurs to competitively create locally owned digital products and services and for the regional and international market as well. The rooting of digital technologies within Trinidad and Tobago may support continuous innovation and high-growth entrepreneurship. When this is pursued it is important to recognise existent biases for some foreign digital services and products, which was evident in this study, and encourage pride in locally made products and services. Additionally, the study highlights ways that entrepreneurs may be supported to grow and to expand. These insights are helpful as they can inform policy as far as the relationship between the entrepreneurs and government is concerned, resulting in a better outcome locally for both entrepreneurs and government

This research, critically, illustrates the complexities of relationships and interactions between digital platforms, entrepreneurs and their environment. Digital platforms afforded entrepreneurs visibility, both locally and internationally. They also afforded accessibility and immediacy simultaneously as well as flexibility, collaboration, and support for learning. Affordances varied by degree. Further, some affordances were evident in some ways across all platforms (visibility, accessibility and immediacy), while others were more evident with some platforms, like social media platforms (flexibility, and collaboration), depending on how they were used or the type of platform. For example, while Uber was not really offering an opportunity to learn, using it provided local entrepreneurs with an opportunity to learn what worked and what did not and therefore create a platform of their own when Uber ceased operations in Trinidad and Tobago.

These affordances also overlap, intertwine and coexist with various constraints that can limit the resourcefulness of a given platform. There are constraints in using digital platforms because their rules and algorithms change constantly. Entrepreneurs cannot control this, and therefore, they must be able to manage high levels of risk, unpredictability, and uncertainty with mental discipline and by being adaptable and creative. Furthermore, entrepreneurs have limited control over user interaction that is influenced by both local culture and social norms as well as digital platform rules. Spam, unwanted solicitation and user comments, as well as the potential for communication to be misinterpreted in speedy online correspondence force entrepreneurs to combine online and offline interaction, or sometimes employ manipulative or creative tactics to deal with these challenges.
In addition to the challenges related to interaction on the platforms, it is sometimes difficult for some entrepreneurs to actualise affordances of digital platforms because of constraints in the fragmented entrepreneurial ecosystem, which are cultural or social as well as infrastructural. A person was more likely to become an entrepreneur if others in their family were also entrepreneurs, though this was not always the case, as financial support was important. Except for higher education, entrepreneurship was not thought to be promoted in the education system. Financing for entrepreneurial endeavors usually came from personal funds or from family. While digital platforms could be used by entrepreneurs to more easily start a business, support from family and other close networks was important for helping the business to grow. Digital platforms while allowing for visibility, did not appear to have any impact on the ability to gain funds. Cultural, social, and infrastructural constraints in the EE sometimes intertwined to constrain the ability to use digital platforms for entrepreneurship. For example, even where overseas customers were available, affordable shipping was not.

There is also a cultural preference for face-to-face interaction, which is required to build trust given that the social perceptions and experiences of crime and corruption locally seems to inhibit local customers from using digital platforms to purchase local goods and services online. Such concerns co-exist with a fear that meeting face-to-face may also lead to theft or violence, yet this risky and often inconvenient method of payment persists. Further, older individuals were found to be less likely to shop online, and so offline advertising and commerce persisted for these groups. There is also a perception that goods and services from overseas were more desirable, and sometimes of better quality and that online transactions with companies based overseas (in the United States for example) were less likely to be subject to criminal or corrupt activity. Consumers, therefore, do not have any problems paying for goods and services overseas online. Consumers’ unwillingness to pay for local goods online may be influencing the unwillingness of financial institutions to significantly invest in the development of e-commerce infrastructure.

The research provides useful insight into how relatively stable cultural and social norms may potentially influence the use of future digital technology in T&T. Such understanding is important given that digital platforms change all the time and very quickly, and that different types of technology may be used later. Future researchers may therefore be examining the influence of different technologies. This research sheds light on the type of social, cultural and historical, economic and infrastructure factors that may influence the use of future digital technology.

The figure below (Figure 1) provides a hierarchy chart generated in NVivo 12 for themes related to research question 2 (RQ2) which investigates the influence of digital platforms on Trinidad and Tobago’s entrepreneurial ecosystem. The size of each rectangle represents how many times the theme has been coded, and each rectangle should be viewed in the context of the others. The World Economic Forum’s entrepreneurial ecosystem pillars were used to support this research (See Table 1).
### Table 1: Eight Pillars and Components of the World Economic Forum’s EE Model

Source: (World Economic Forum, 2013, p.7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pillar</th>
<th>Component</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accessible Markets</td>
<td>• Domestic Market – Large Companies as Customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Domestic Market – Small/Medium Companies as Customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Domestic Market – Governments as Customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Foreign Market – Large Companies as Customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Foreign Market – Small/Medium Companies as Customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Foreign Market – Governments as Customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Capital/Workforce</td>
<td>• Management Talent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Technical Talent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Entrepreneurial Company Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Outsourcing Availability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Access to Immigrant Workforce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding and Finance</td>
<td>• Friends and Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Angel Investors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Private Equity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Venture Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Access to Debt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support System</td>
<td>• Mentors/Advisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Professional Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Incubators/Accelerators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Network of Entrepreneurial Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulatory Framework and Infrastructure</td>
<td>• Ease of Starting a Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tax Incentives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Business-Friendly Legislation/Policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Access to Basic Infrastructure (for example water, electricity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Access to Telecommunications/Broadband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Access to Transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Training</td>
<td>• Available Workforce with Pre-University Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Available Workforce with University Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Entrepreneur-Specific Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Universities as Catalysts</td>
<td>• Major Universities Promoting a Culture of Respect for Entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Major Universities Playing a Key Role in Idea-Formation for New Companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Major Universities Playing a Key Role in Providing Graduates for New Companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Support</td>
<td>• Tolerance of Risk and Failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Preference for Self-Employment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relevant components of the World Economic Forum’s entrepreneurial ecosystem pillars (World Economic Forum 2013) are provided in the darker blue rectangles where applicable to the code to illustrate overlaps.

Figure 1: Hierarchy Chart Themes for Impact of Digital Platforms on EE in T&T) Mapped to World Economic Forum EE Components

Additionally Figure 2 below uses matrix coding to generate a network diagram using Gephi, open graph visualisation software and illustrates how codes related to how digital platforms are used to interact overlap and coexist with affordances and constraints. The lines represent the strength of connections between codes.
These findings are discussed in relation to recommendations in the following section.
RECOMMENDATIONS

An objective of this research is to provide recommendations to entrepreneurs using digital platforms for entrepreneurship and to government agencies seeking to support entrepreneurship in Trinidad and Tobago. The following is a list of recommendations based on the research findings.

Entrepreneur Recommendations

1. Dealing with Copying

Almost all entrepreneurs interviewed reported being copied or in some cases copying others, both locally and overseas, often without their knowledge. Entrepreneurs need to be visible, grow and expand in a crowded online marketplace that has high levels of copying and where rival businesses that copy may be able to grow faster. For example, some entrepreneurs influenced businesses that copied their business ideas by manipulating them into liking their business on social media, thereby increasing the number of people who followed their business. In other cases, a higher quality product was differentiated, helping an entrepreneur to maintain loyal customers. Entrepreneurs should carefully choose what is release online, as having information continually online could lead to increased copying not only locally but internationally. Entrepreneurs can also investigate ways to get creative in adapting or recombining what already exists. This copying constraint can be supported by producing higher quality and value products. They could also benefit from learning more about intellectual property rights and ways to deal with this in an online environment. Concerning entrepreneurs copying others, it also appears that entrepreneurs may benefit from spending time away from digital platforms to refresh their creative process.

2. T&T Branding

Entrepreneurs can better work together to promote Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) as not only a place to do business but a place of creativity and multiculturalism to promote a compelling T&T brand which can help to differentiate T&T entrepreneurs in the digital marketplace and help them to compete internationally. Entrepreneurs can learn about work in this area from other countries in the Caribbean and overseas (Place Brand Observer, 2017, Dinnie, 2016).

3. Entrepreneurs Working Together to Solve Problems and Lobby Government

The research revealed that there was some mistrust and sometimes an unwillingness to work with other entrepreneurs, especially if they did not know them. However, entrepreneurs should try to come
together in the first instance with those that they do trust through small groups to help each other offline and online to support their businesses, as the research shows that entrepreneurs often benefit from working with other entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs can work not only with others in similar businesses but those with different types of businesses as doing so may be less threatening. Such groups can also feed into larger entrepreneur associations which can be formed to bring their interests to bear on government policies. The formation of groups, networks or associations could be particularly helpful in helping entrepreneurs solve problems and lobby for interests pertaining to entrepreneurship (Scott and Itai, 1993), particularly for micro and small business, especially since the government may often be unaware of their concerns.

4. Finding Ways for Offline Engagement

While digital platforms are useful, most entrepreneurs reported that it was not a replacement for physical interaction because culturally, individuals preferred face-to-face interaction, and the aura of this interaction could not be replicated online. Additionally, locally based online networks (particularly on social media platforms) were helpful because important offline networks supported them and so it appears that simply being online is not enough for sourcing valuable information and developing strong business ties. Therefore, entrepreneurs must find ways to engage and network with important stakeholders offline. Additionally, there may be significant potential to create services that cater to the public need for offline connection, with consideration for physical distancing when required.

5. Time Management

Entrepreneurs report facing difficulty managing their time when using digital platforms. Having to manage multiple platforms, including for both personal and professional use, and amidst distractions demanded much time and so sometimes outweighed the benefit of being able to communicate quickly. The need for time management was particularly true for social media platforms. Entrepreneurs must find ways to monitor their time spent online to make the best use of their limited time resources. It can also be helpful to have a dedicated social media platform manager tasked with continually developing social media expertise, particularly because digital platforms continually change unexpectedly.

6. Opportunities for Local Products, Services, Platforms and Technologies

The research found that there are gaps in the ability of digital platforms to cater to the local markets. A digital platform or any other technology that is easy to use, addresses an important need, and is tailored to the local culture can potentially do very well in the country and may help to fuel the development of the technology sector locally. This resonates with research done elsewhere that explains the importance of indigenous and local knowledge to technological innovation (Ezeanya-
Esiobu, 2019). This finding was evident with Uber, which struggled to deal with the local constraints surrounding the use of this platform. However, Uber’s arrival (and exit) from T&T paved the way for the development of a locally based ride service that could benefit from learning about Uber’s business strategy and capitalise on their local knowledge, given the country’s long history of informal taxi services. This is also evident with the introduction of Skybox companies that cater to T&T’s demand for international products. It should also be noted that entrepreneurs reported their offerings often resonated not only locally but internationally and could in some cases better stand out online. Therefore, entrepreneurs need not shy away from producing local products and services as they may benefit from increased visibility with a unique offering in a crowded international online marketplace. Further, while some entrepreneurs report that they engage in entrepreneurship to gain high-income and expand, others engage in it because they are passionate about what they do and fulfil needs that are not economic. Such entrepreneurs may not necessarily be pursuing very high growth but instead sustainability at a micro or small business level (Isenberg 2016). Given the vast majority of businesses fail, this too is important to note in deciding if to scale, even when resources are available.

7. Managing Information Storage

Many entrepreneurs report storing of information on digital platforms, whether they be correspondence information, photos, or general information about their business. Therefore, much information that may be important to the business is at risk of being lost, for example, on social media platforms. Entrepreneurs should not store all their information on digital platforms and should have control over important business information. They should find ways to store important information in other secure places to ensure that this does not happen. Paid-for cloud services can be used, which are probably more secure than keeping it in their house on paper, or on a platform whose rules continually change without notice, potentially putting access to information there at risk (Wu et al., 2013). However, using the cloud also carry a security risk which entrepreneurs must consider (Wu et al., 2013).

8. Supplement Learning Online

Most entrepreneurs report using digital platforms to supplement their learning. For example, YouTube is used to gain new skills (for example, when a problem arises) while Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) is used for more structured learning. They also become members or participate in closed groups to support this. Entrepreneurs can continue to capitalise on the use of online platforms to learn what they need for their business. Additionally, fundamental skills and training related to an entrepreneur’s industry or trade is also helpful because entrepreneurs may suffer or be disadvantaged in the long run if they lack an understanding of basic information or skills related to their industry or
trade. Further, entrepreneurs using digital platforms still need to understand the fundamentals of business administration, management, and marketing. A combination of offline and online courses can help to develop knowledge and expertise, especially where foundational information and skills has been taught in person.

9. Leveraging International Connections and Networks

Entrepreneurs using digital platforms are already exposed to a wider market place online. Where local resources are not developed, entrepreneurs should look for support outside of T&T. They can also source mentors, human skills/expertise or even funding regionally, or internationally (including from the Caribbean diaspora) to support their entrepreneurship, and can do so collaboratively. Some research has already indicated the importance of the diaspora for economic development and entrepreneurship (Minto-Coy, 2016, World Bank, 2016). Though some entrepreneurs voiced their willingness to engage in crowdfunding initiatives to support their entrepreneurship, this is not at all developed locally, but entrepreneurs can explore whether these types of digital platforms may be of benefit, especially if they are targeting an international market.

Policy Recommendations

1. Developing E-commerce Transactions Locally

Barriers to e-commerce include the lack of a centralised verification process for T&T and the requirement to use a credit card to receive money using PayPal in T&T (e.g. a Visa or a Visa debit card) (Oxford Business Group, 2017). This facility is not always readily available to an early-stage entrepreneur (Oxford Business Group, 2017). These barriers also mean that it takes longer for an entrepreneur to receive payments. Therefore, e-commerce becomes much more expensive for a T&T entrepreneur than it would be for someone based in the United States, for example (Oxford Business Group, 2017). Additionally, it was believed that T&T’s small market and the unwillingness of banking institutions to give up direct control of their customers, leads to limited improvements in e-commerce because there is less incentive to invest in it. Local e-commerce platforms like WiPay, however, are being used and were found to be cost-effective, and there should be more research on these local options.

However, policy-makers should also be aware that cultural issues influence the willingness to use digital platforms for payment. Customers desire to know and see where their money goes and a lack of trust inhibits the use of payment platforms locally even when they are available and accessible and even when the same platforms are used for international payments. Therefore, even where entrepreneurs did not see barriers to receiving payment online, the public was generally unwilling to do these types
of online transactions locally. This was in part because older demographics were less likely to shop online, and preferred traditional advertising. This barrier also existed because individuals culturally prefer face-to-face transactions or have little trust in local companies operating online, without corresponding physical interaction, even though meeting face-to-face to exchange money seemed to carry a higher risk of theft and even violence. Most entrepreneurs said they wanted online payment transactions, though customers were unwilling to pay online.

Some stakeholders believed that an unwillingness to pay taxes influenced an entrepreneur’s decision not to use e-commerce platforms. However, a significant number of entrepreneurs in this study either provided a way for local customers to pay online or indicated that they would like to do so. The implementation of physical distancing measures due to COVID-19 supports a more rapid development of e-commerce locally because a prolonged and required shift in social interaction may change social norms if online payment for local goods is the only option available. Nevertheless, if the issues outlined are not acknowledged and tackled, even when online payment solutions are cost-effective and readily available, consumers may still be unable or unwilling to use them.

2. Making Shipping Overseas Reliable and Cheaper

While it was easy for individuals to source goods from overseas, it was extremely challenging for them to reliably send goods overseas because doing so was prohibitively expensive. The local postal service was said to be unreliable, and the postage of an item using the express service offered by a foreign postal service like DHL exceeded the cost of some items. It was also cheaper to shop for goods from overseas online than it was to purchase the same goods where they were available locally, even with the introduction of the 7% Online Purchase Tax (OPT). Governments can support initiatives that allow for more affordable and competitive shipping and transport by encouraging and supporting the development of innovative services and related infrastructure that also help to sell T&T goods overseas. Shipping can also be made more competitive, for example, by making the local postal service more cost-effective and reliable and innovating as was seen with the Skybox companies. This issue is particularly worrying for entrepreneurs who often say they have customers overseas but are unable to do shipping cost-effectively.

3. Support from Digital Platforms for Diversification

Digital platforms seem to have promoted innovation, especially in areas for which visuals are essential, and for which there is much potential in T&T, such as the creative sector. Initiatives such as CreativeTT is encouraging. Most of the entrepreneurs in this study were not focused on buying and selling but instead said they were trying to innovate by providing new types of products, sometimes influenced by access to the wider marketplace, for which they created new offerings, often with a very T&T flavour.
This benefitted from the country’s multiculturalism. Additionally, there is much opportunity for innovation in relation to services that use local knowledge and data analytics (Wedel and Kannan, 2016, Rohm et al., 2019) to meet a specific need in T&T, particularly since it is difficult for international digital platforms to completely meet local needs and requirements.

4. Gender and Age Balance amongst Entrepreneur Stakeholders

While half of the entrepreneurs interviewed in this study were female, the entrepreneurial stakeholders were overwhelmingly male and tended to be older. Furthermore, some female entrepreneurs reported that they were excluded from important business networks because of their gender. Given this study evidenced that many entrepreneurs are women, it is important for women entrepreneurs and entrepreneur stakeholders to be better represented particularly in decision-making or policy-making regarding entrepreneurship. Further, this study finds that digital platforms are used primarily by young individuals but none of the stakeholders interviewed were under the age of twenty-five. Therefore, the government could involve more women and young entrepreneurs to help support their business programmes and support their creation of business networks tailored to their needs and involvement in larger networks as well.

5. Support for Creativity, Entrepreneurship and Digital Literacy in Education

Many respondents agreed that the non-tertiary education system does not support entrepreneurship as a viable career path because it focuses on other disciplines, like sciences, for example. Educators, therefore, could consider highlighting the importance of adaptability and creativity in today’s environment as well as the potential for different types of entrepreneurship (which may range from a micro or small-scale sustainable business, to a regional or international one) despite one’s choice of subjects. The development of an entrepreneurial mind-set is also important for students, bearing in mind that technology is continuously changing and so the skills needed in the world of work and for business creation also change all the time in all industries. The research underscores the importance of creativity, particularly when absorbing other ideas and recombining these ideas in new ways and Trinidad and Tobago entrepreneurs should benefit from the multicultural nature of the society. It also highlights the need for support in managing digital platform distraction. The effect of distraction when using digital platforms on children, the country’s future entrepreneurs should also be considered.

6. Promoting historical, local and cultural knowledge and resources for technological innovation

Instead of a focus on importing international technologies, products and services it is also important to explore innovation that stems not only from local products, but precious knowledge held locally about Trinidad and Tobago’s history and multi-cultural social environment, as seen with the development and
spread of the steelpan, and Carnival. Further, it was believed entrepreneurial opportunity in relation to agriculture was underdeveloped and it was suggested that digital technology could be used to support this. Local or indigenous knowledge and expertise is essential for entrepreneurship as it encourages invention and innovation when the necessary information and support is made available (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019). As a result, efforts should be made to document and preserve cultural information, which should also be foundationally taught within the education system. Policies should seek to increase local capacity to maintain and access local cultural information, understand cultural and social practices and conjure historical knowledge since this can support technology innovation (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019) and entrepreneurship. Where this has been done, for example in China and African countries, (in agriculture and medicine) innovation has been significant (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019). Further, given the importance of in person interaction to T&T’s culture, there may be possibilities for innovation in this regard even as digital platforms allow for physical distancing when required.

7. Public Relations Campaign: Supporting Positive Representation of T&T

T&T news and aspects of its culture are visible online, and so more effort needs to be made to promote a positive image of T&T. A digital strategy to help promote T&T as a place of creativity, multi-culturalism, and trustworthy business seems important for supporting T&T entrepreneurship. Initiatives by other countries (Place Brand Observer, 2017, Dinnie, 2016) can be informative. Furthermore, entrepreneurs have represented T&T in many forums internationally, and in this study, it seemed mostly without government support. Some entrepreneurs reported being reluctant to source funding from or get involved in government initiatives, because doing so may hinder their entrepreneurial efforts or because their efforts would be ignored. Nevertheless, the types of activities many entrepreneurs are engaged in, particularly in the creative sector provide substantial entrepreneurial opportunities, particularly if the country has a positive image globally. Such a campaign would benefit from leadership by entrepreneurs that use or create digital platforms.

8. Support with Intellectual Property Rights

Copying not only locally, but internationally is a major concern for entrepreneurs in this study as is the case for all entrepreneurs in the digital age (Menard, 2016). Many entrepreneurs reported having to find ways to circumvent this, by either not posting certain types of information, reporting incidents of copying to the digital platforms or simply trying to provide the best product available. However, there was no guarantee that they would not be copied, and entrepreneurs felt helpless to address this. While there is some research in the T&T context (Radauer, 2015), there needs to be more consideration of digital influences. Additionally, not only is policy important but practical education and training. A guide
can be developed to support entrepreneurs in dealing with issues around intellectual property online to reduce copying and the impact of copying when using digital platforms.

9. Encouraging Links to Diaspora and Caribbean Networks

A significant number of the individuals interviewed indicated they previously lived overseas, were from the T&T diaspora in the Americas or Europe, or another Caribbean country. The tendency for people from the Caribbean diaspora or the Caribbean more generally to come to T&T to set up a business, illustrates that many believe the country to be a suitable and preferable place for engaging in entrepreneurship. The economy and location were thought to be supportive to entrepreneurship endeavours, and doing businesses in a small country like T&T was seen to offer increased potential for entrepreneurs on the international scale, particularly since many individuals believe they can operate businesses from any location because of the convenience offered by digital technology.

They also believed that being from a small country could make their entrepreneurial offerings better stand out online. However, these diaspora networks and Caribbean links are insufficiently exploited for the development of entrepreneurship though they provide a market for locally produced goods and services and support entrepreneurs looking to develop their businesses locally and internationally for the benefit of T&T. Further, working with other Caribbean countries to support local and regional entrepreneurship can be mutually beneficial. There can also be better links with influential persons from the diaspora and the rest of the Caribbean in varied business groups or industry networks to support entrepreneurship locally (Minto-Coy, 2016, World Bank, 2016). Individuals in these networks may, for example, be able to help entrepreneurs source funding, find human skills and expertise.

10. International Mentorship

The research found that sourcing mentors locally was problematic because mentors expect payment and there was a level of mistrust that was inherent in mentor/entrepreneur relations locally. However, mentorship was taking place usually informally with individuals entrepreneurs knew and trusted in T&T’s fragmented EE, but also with internationally based mentors. The government could better support mentorship programmes connecting T&T entrepreneurs with internationally based entrepreneurs (for example, those known to them in international networks). Government programmes that facilitated this were found to be helpful. Guidelines can also be put in place for these types of mentorship arrangements, given entrepreneur concerns about copying.

11. Support for a Venture Capitalist (VC) or Business Angel Network and Funding Incentives

In many cases, entrepreneurs sourced finance from family or were self-funded. There seems to be few alternative sources of income for someone who does not already have significant assets or high levels
of disposable income. Tax breaks for investing in new firms may also be considered (Acs and Szerb, 2007). Lack of finance is hindering the growth of entrepreneurship. An unwillingness to share information and resources outside of a business person’s network appeared to influence the lack of a well-formed Venture Capitalist network in the country for the few businesses that could scale rapidly. Government policy can support incentives for the financing of entrepreneurial ventures as well. The development of a VC network (Islam et al., 2018, Bertoni et al., 2019) or business angel network (Bonini et al., 2019) for T&T that could potentially be linked to the rest of the Caribbean could support this. Should this be developed, it must also be noted that entrepreneurs report larger businesses and foreign businesses interests may thwart their efforts to grow.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

This report offers insight into digital platform influences on entrepreneurship in Trinidad and Tobago. It adds to existing knowledge of the highly apparent influences of digital platforms on entrepreneur behaviour, activity, structures, processes, and ultimately, outcomes. However, it acknowledges that there are limitations to digital platform use because of platform rules, which continuously change, as well as culture, social norms, infrastructure and an historically situated political economy.

While the research is instrumental for understanding digital platform interaction and relationships, there are limits to generalisation. However, given the broad definition of both entrepreneur and digital platform adopted for this research, and the very critical role culture and social norms were found to play in guiding how digital platforms are used for entrepreneurship, the research provides insight into ways future digital technology may potentially shape as well as be shaped by T&T’s cultural and social environment, which changes much more slowly than digital technology.

The research aids our understanding of the highly complex relationships between digital platforms, entrepreneurs, and their environment, which manifest and interrelate both offline and online. It facilitates an understanding of the way digital platforms are used to support and navigate these relationships, not only within a fragmented entrepreneurial ecosystem but outside of it. It provides a timely, relevant, and useful understanding of the role digital platforms play in Trinidad and Tobago’s entrepreneurial endeavours Trinidad and Tobago. The recommendations which are carefully considered within the context of the findings will be helpful for both entrepreneurs and government.


BURKE S. (2014) Creative clustering in small island states: The case of Trinidad and Tobago’s carnival industry. Caribbean Quarterly 60(1): 74-95


