

The role of transformational entrepreneurship in managing a digital platform: the case of Yamamay

TE and digital platform

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Abstract

Purpose – Transformational entrepreneurship (TE) is a concept referring to the ability of entrepreneurs to face global challenges, such as the economic crisis, to improve the well-being of the community. Considering the current scenario of COVID-19, the way digital platforms support TE in overcoming a crisis, specifically the economic crisis caused by the pandemic, was analysed.

Design/methodology/approach – To achieve the goal, the authors used the case study methodology. The interview was compared for the company analysed stands out due to its use of digital platforms as a tool to increase brand value. The authors conducted a semi-structured, open-ended interview with the entrepreneur and founder of Yamamay, a company operating in the retail sector. The results obtained from validity using the open coding method.

Findings – The main findings show that the implementation of digital platforms supported the entrepreneur in formulating strategic choices that allowed the company to continue offering its services despite the store closures imposed by the pandemic. The whole concept of traditional retail has been and continues to be revised, rationalising it and integrating it with a more omnichannel logic in which digital platforms play a fundamental role.

Practical implications – This paper provides market participants with useful information regarding the ability of this form of technology to support entrepreneurs in a crisis context. The results could also serve as an example for other retail companies regarding how to manage the consequences of the pandemic.

Originality/value – This contribution represents an extension of the existing literature that deepens the understanding of the relationship between digital platforms and TE in a particular scenario, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The effect of business decisions on the adoption of digital platforms to meet increasing and changing customer needs has been examined.

Keywords Digital platforms, Transformational entrepreneurship, COVID-19 pandemic, Business strategy

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship has been changing at an exponential rate in recent years (Matricano, 2020a). To address global phenomena, such as poverty, unemployment and the crisis in general, transformational entrepreneurship (TE) has developed. It is an emerging phenomenon related to the need to implement effective and efficient entrepreneurial behaviours that address global challenges (Maas *et al.*, 2019). TE is defined in terms of the ability to create innovative solutions to social problems (Marmor, 2012), such as creating new job opportunities to reduce the unemployment rate (Miller *et al.*, 2009).

New digital technologies are a valuable tool used to support entrepreneurship, encouraging improved business profitability, especially in a crisis context (Song, 2019). While digital platforms facilitate knowledge sharing, they also enhance collaboration amongst users,



This paper represents the results of a joint research project carried out by the four authors. However, the various sections of the paper are divided as follows: Sections 5, 6 and 7–Grazia Dicuonzo; Section 2–Francesca Donofrio; Section 3–Antonio Fusco; Sections 1 and 4–Simona Ranaldo.

businesses and other actors by leveraging network effects (Sahut *et al.*, 2019). As revealed by a recent Deloitte survey, for 62% of entrepreneurs, the ability to innovate is one of the main levers to ensure the long-term solidity of the company in the next 10–20 years (Deloitte, 2020); however, the European Commission's annual survey (European Commission, 2020) shows that the level of the digitalisation of Italian enterprises is still lower than the European average (Italy is in 25th place amongst the 28 EU Member States), with significant room for improvement, especially in terms of digital skills, the adoption of digital behaviour and the integration of digital technologies in e-commerce (only 10% of Italian small-medium companies sell online against an EU average of 18%). COVID-19 has certainly increased the use of new technologies as tools to support entrepreneurs to ensure business continuity, allowing for a greater operational efficiency in a socially distant landscape (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2020). In particular, the pandemic has resulted in an increase in the use of digital platforms by both consumers and entrepreneurs (Troise *et al.*, 2020). In this regard, some studies have indeed highlighted the ability of digital platforms to strengthen relationships with customers and suppliers, from which it is possible to capture important insights and innovative ideas (Dutot and Van Horne, 2015) and is useful to respond to the context of uncertainty in which businesses operate (Nambisan, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, has forced many firms toward a reorganisation of work through the use of digital platforms (Dicunzo and Donofrio, 2021; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2020; Priyono *et al.*, 2020). In fact, the ability of digital platforms, such as mobile and cloud computing or social media, to support entrepreneurs in how they deal with uncertainty and change is well-known (Nambisan, 2016); however, there are still limited contributions regarding how entrepreneurs are adapting to the changes imposed by the COVID-19 crisis to improve community well-being and to ensure that the digital platforms support TE (Igwe, 2018; Ratten, 2020).

The aim of this study was to fill this gap by expanding the literature on the topic and by providing evidence of the role of platforms in supporting TE in a crisis context. To answer our research question, we used the case study methodology. The analysis was conducted on a single Italian case study, which was selected because it is considered one of the most representative cases of the application of digital platforms in the Italian context. The main results of our analysis show that the implementation of digital platforms has fostered entrepreneurial growth, stimulating the formulation of new strategic choices in response to the pandemic. In particular, following store closures, digital platforms enabled the company to continue to provide a similar shopping experience to consumers as it did in-person while ensuring online customer service. This contribution has practical implications as it offers market operators useful elements to understand the effects of digital platforms on TE in the context of a crisis. This study could also represent an example for other companies in the sector regarding how to manage the consequences of the pandemic.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on the topic, and Section 3 outlines the research methodology based on a single case study of an Italian company operating in the retail sector. Section 4 presents the results, Section 5 explains the conclusions, and Section 6 outlines the theoretical and practical implications. Finally, Section 7 discusses the limitations and future research avenues.

2. Literature review

2.1 *The evolution of the entrepreneurial concept*

The first studies to address the issue of entrepreneurship focused on how entrepreneurs deal with the uncertain environment in which they find themselves operating by implementing a process of creative destruction, which involves destroying the old to create something innovative (Kirzner, 1979; Schumpeter, 1934). Innovation, risk-taking and proactivity are the three key elements of entrepreneurship (Miller, 1983). Indeed, there is a positive correlation between entrepreneurship and innovation (Zhao, 2005).

In particular, traditional entrepreneurship is characterised by the identification of new opportunities to meet the needs of customers not yet satisfied by the market (Stevenson and Gumpert, 1985). In this sense, entrepreneurship plays an important role in the process of economic and social growth in many countries, increasing the interest of many scholars and policy makers who have analysed the issue from different points of view (Malchow-Møller *et al.*, 2011).

The concept of entrepreneurship has evolved steadily over time as a result of global phenomena (Matricano, 2020a), such as unemployment, economic crises and technological progress, which have led to the emergence of TE, which aims to effectively and efficiently tackle these challenges (Maas *et al.*, 2019; Matricano, 2020b). In other words, TE is the ability to create innovative solutions to major global problems (Marmer, 2012), e.g., the creation of new job opportunities (Miller *et al.*, 2009). TE fosters improvements in community well-being by exerting its influence on economic, social, cultural and political dimensions (multidimensional impact) as well as on individuals, organisations, communities and society (multilevel) (Virmani and Lépineux, 2016).

In addition, transformational entrepreneurs are distinguished by their pursuit of technologies that can ensure long-term business survival (Igwé, 2018).

Thus, traditional and TE have been joined by digital entrepreneurship (DE) (Kraus *et al.*, 2019), which digitalises, in whole or in part, business activities previously carried out by natural persons (Esmaceli, 2011). Some studies have defined DE as a “*sub-category of entrepreneurship in which some or all of that should be physical in a traditional organisation has been digitized*” (Hull *et al.*, 2007). According to others, DE instead is “*as the process of entrepreneurial creation of digital value through the use of various socio-technical digital enablers to support effective acquisition, processing, distribution, and consumption of digital information*” (Sahut *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, DE is based on the assumption that the characteristics of digital technologies are capable of shaping entrepreneurial behaviours (Nambisan, 2016).

2.2 Transformational entrepreneurship and digital platforms: which link?

The diffusion of technologies, such as artificial intelligence, big data, blockchain, machine learning and IoT, has radically changed the way business is conducted, even in light of consumer demand for innovative services and products (Dal Mas *et al.*, 2020; Hansen, 2019).

Alongside these technologies are digital platforms, which include cloud and mobile computing, social media and in-memory technologies (Nambisan, 2013). Digital platforms can be defined as “*a software based platform as the extensible codebase of a software-based system that provides core functionality shared by the modules that interoperate with it and the interfaces through which they interoperate (e.g. Apple’s iOS and Mozilla’s Firefox browser)*” (Tiwana *et al.*, 2010, p. 675). In other words, digital platforms can be defined as a set of digital resources that facilitate interactions between participants (Constantinides *et al.*, 2018). This interaction, along with the ability granted to users to perform defined tasks and them being technologically mediated, represents the fundamental common characteristics of digital platforms (Cusumano *et al.*, 2019).

Although the concept of a digital platform is not new (Ciborra, 1996), recently, its strategic importance has increased considerably (Matt *et al.*, 2015; Sebastian *et al.*, 2017; Yoo *et al.*, 2012). In fact, there is a growing implementation of digital platforms in different sectors, such as banking, healthcare, transportation, energy, telecommunications, information technology industries and media sectors (Kiesling, 2016; de Reuver *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, in 2018, the most highly capitalised companies included platform companies, such as Microsoft, Apple, Amazon and Alphabet (Cusumano *et al.*, 2019).

Some of the profiles exploring the topic of digital platforms are those associated with entrepreneurship (Srinivasan and Venkatraman, 2018). As is well-known, there is extensive literature on entrepreneurship, ranging from the analysis of behavioural characteristics of

founders as necessary factors for starting a new venture or creating new opportunities (Dyer *et al.*, 2008; Moker *et al.*, 2020) to the study of individual entrepreneurial skills (Hitt *et al.*, 2011).

With the advent of digital technologies, within which digital platforms take a predominant position (Song, 2019; Troise, 2019), new forms of entrepreneurship have been formed (Nambisan, 2016; Oukil, 2011). Indeed, the ability of digital technologies to transform entrepreneurship is well-known (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014), and they also offer the possibility to capture new business opportunities (Elia *et al.*, 2016). To this end, the ability of entrepreneurs to develop a digital mindset becomes essential (Soltanifar and Smailhodžić, 2021) to survive and compete in the new digital economy (Hansen, 2019).

Through digital platforms, entrepreneurs have the opportunity to develop a business model capable of creating value as a result of sharing information and knowledge with other people, companies and customers (Sahut *et al.*, 2019). In this regard, some studies have highlighted the ability of digital channels to build and strengthen relationships with customers and suppliers, from which it is possible to capture important insights and innovative ideas (Dutot and Van Horne, 2015). This aspect is particularly relevant if we consider the current scenario of continuous technological evolution, making the ability to adapt to changes and innovation essential requirements for the success and survival of companies (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2020; Srinivasan and Venkatraman, 2018).

In addition, considering that businesses operate in an uncertain context, technologies represent a tool that favours an immediate response to change (Nambisan, 2016). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many businesses towards digitalisation, especially due to the emergence of smart-working, which has required a real reorganisation of work through the use of digital platforms (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2020; Priyono *et al.*, 2020). The spread of the coronavirus has brought about profound changes in the culture and social interactions of individuals, consequently leading to new forms of entrepreneurship, particularly social entrepreneurship, which are essential for managing the ongoing health emergency (Bacq and Lumpkin, 2021). In this regard, some studies have found that in response to the crisis, several companies have expanded the range of products that they offer by producing hand sanitisers to secure an additional revenue stream (Liñán and Jaén, 2020). In this sense, it is possible to talk about TE as transformational entrepreneurs continually seek and develop innovative solutions not only for the wealth of their company but also for the well-being of society (Virmani and Lépineux, 2016).

TE involves change that to be realised requires a commitment from employees to develop new skills and from the entrepreneur to invest in employee training (Chrisanty *et al.*, 2021). Certainly, the benefits related to digital technologies outweigh the costs that the company is required to incur for employee training. More precisely, new technologies allow entrepreneurs to reduce costs and increase profits and encourage the development of new products and services by drawing on the professional background of external innovators (De Falco *et al.*, 2017) through the opportunity to place their products and services in new contexts (Srinivasan and Venkatraman, 2018).

Previous work has analysed the impact of digital platforms and new technologies in general on corporate business models (Sahut *et al.*, 2019; Sussan and Acs, 2017), organisational or governance aspects and entrepreneurial strategies (Srinivasan and Venkatraman, 2018). In contrast, there are still few studies that have analysed the connection between TE and readiness for change (Chrisanty *et al.*, 2021) or how firms undertake TE (Igwe, 2018). Moreover, despite the ability of digital platforms to support entrepreneurs in an uncertain environment (Nambisan, 2016), even less research explores how digital platforms support entrepreneurs, even in a crisis context, such as that caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ratten, 2020). In fact, the pandemic has caused an inevitable change in the social interactions of individuals, and with reference to companies operating in different sectors, the closure of stores has represented an important obstacle to business

continuity. To respond to the crisis, entrepreneurs have had to show the ability to adapt to the new global challenge (Maas *et al.*, 2019), and in this context, it is interesting to explore how TE has continued to secure the needs and well-being of the community (Virmani and Lépineux, 2016).

In line with these theoretical considerations, we have formulated the following research question:

RQ. How do digital platforms support TE to respond to the global challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. Research methodology

The literature review revealed a gap in theoretical and empirical studies on the impact of digital platforms and TE on the COVID-19 pandemic scenario, which creates an interesting and highly topical research opportunity. Thus, the aim of this study was to utilise the opportunity represented by the gap in the theoretical and empirical literature and the relative novelty of the topic. To this end, we used the case study methodology, which is particularly appropriate when the object of analysis is complex and the researcher needs to conduct a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the complex phenomenon in its real-life context to understand the interactions between the events and the reference context (Berry and Otley, 2004; Yin, 2014). In particular, the company examined, Yamamay, represents an ideal setting to explore the relationship between digital platforms and TE. Yamamay, which operates in the retail sector, was strongly affected by the negative consequences of store closures due to the pandemic. Moreover, the company stands out due to its adoption of digital platforms, which is the main reason for choosing this business.

For the analysis of a case study, researchers can use not only documentary sources for their analysis but can also make direct contact, such as through interviews, with those who took part in the phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989). An initially relevant aspect of the case study is contextualisation, which makes this method particularly useful when it is not appropriate to separate the phenomenon from the context in which it develops (De Massis and Kotlar, 2014; Ridder, 2017). A second aspect is the multiplicity of data collection and analysis techniques available to the researchers, giving them a rich source of data to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Parker, 2012). The use of case studies also allows researchers to investigate the phenomenon from a practical perspective, thus addressing one of the most debated points in the business literature, which is the gap between theory and practice (Ryan *et al.*, 2002).

This characteristic constitutes one of the main strengths of the use of the case study methodology, which, together with the other considerations, led us to favour it.

The case study used is exploratory (Humphrey and Lee, 2004). Through the analysis of a specific case, the aim was to assess whether new technologies have influenced entrepreneurial behaviour and how they have done so. The approach followed in the case study is interpretive. According to the interpretive approach, phenomena need to be contextualised in time and space and explained only in terms of what they mean to the people who participate in them (see Section 3.1). That is, there is no objective reality; reality is constructed by individuals, and the researcher is also called upon to interpret it (see Section 3.2). Using this approach, social and economic phenomena cannot simply be observed but must also be interpreted by the researcher. This means that there is not an absolute reality; rather, different possibilities are generated by the point of view adopted to interpret the facts (Ryan *et al.*, 2002).

A single case study was chosen to conduct a denser (Ahrens and Dent, 2015) and richer analysis of the phenomenon as well as a more intensive study of the context

(Baxter and Chua, 1998). Analysing a single case study is by no means without limitations. Of these, the most common include issues related to methodological accuracy, researcher objectivity and external validity. A second issue concerns the reliability and replicability of the various forms of single case analysis. Third, the most important criticism of a single case study analysis is the issue of external validity or generalisability; however, as Eckstein observes, generalisability is *“mitigated by the fact that its capability to do so [is] never claimed by its exponents; in fact it is often explicitly repudiated”* (Eckstein, 1975, p. 134). Furthermore, as Gerring states, *“theory confirmation/disconfirmation is not the case study’s strong suit”* (Gerring, 2004, p. 350). Finally, using a typical or extreme case *“often reveal more information because they activate more actors . . . and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied”* (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 229).

3.1 Research context

Yamamay was established in 2001 based on the idea of the Neapolitan entrepreneur Gianluigi Cimmino, who believing strongly in the potential of the retail world and the underwear market decided to invest with the help of his family in a new entrepreneurial challenge. Exactly 10 years later, Yamamay experienced a second period of great development and growth due to the entry of the Carlino family, founder of the Carpisa brand, and the creation of Pianoforte Holding, into which the two brands converged. The Group is jointly led by the two founding families, Cimmino and Carlino, with the aim of supporting international development, providing global strategic guidance to the brands and exploiting the economies of scale and scope necessary for the future development of the brands. The Group quickly reached the 1,000-store mark with more than 1,200 employees.

The Group is constantly striving to find innovative solutions to satisfy its customers and to reduce the environmental impact of its products throughout their life cycle: from the design and planning stage to the choice of raw materials to production and the end of the life cycle while always ensuring quality and safety. The drive to innovate has always been inherent in Pianoforte’s strategy, especially in view of the sectors in which it operates, where the ability to evolve and propose new solutions are essential elements for business success. As evidence of the Group’s attention to these issues, Yamamay not only has an in-house R&D centre devoted to seeking the most innovative solutions but was also awarded the “Entrepreneur of the Year” prize for innovation in the fashion sector in 2016 by the consulting firm Ernst and Young. Carpisa, on the other hand, received the SMAU Innovation Award in 2017 and 2018 thanks to the Carpisa Lab project including the most modern equipment for 3D design, supported by Virtual Reality, and luggage testing. The Group’s approach to managing innovation is based on four main features:

- (1) Customer communication and raising awareness of the sustainability features of products, a subject to which the Group is committed to communicating fairly and transparently;
- (2) Product innovation, which includes the choice of sustainable materials in terms of the environmental impact related to the production, use and disposal of products and aimed at the comfort and well-being of users;
- (3) Process innovation, which includes the design and sustainable design phase, with the aim to reduce waste and the use of raw materials;
- (4) Constant collaboration with research organisations and university departments enables the constant exchange of information on research results and the sharing of laboratories and related experimental equipment.

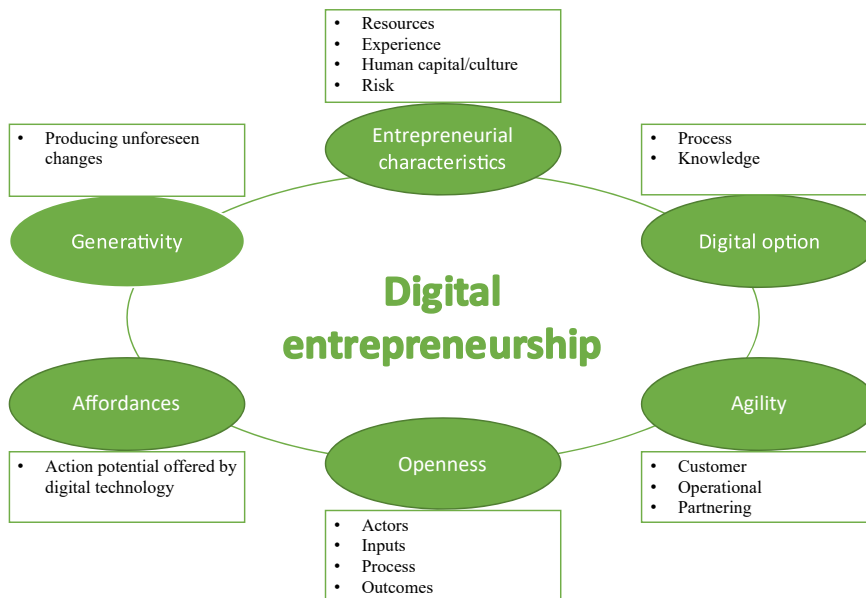
3.2 Data collection

A semi-structured, open-ended interview was conducted with Dr Cimmino, entrepreneur and founder of Yamamay Spa and CEO of Pianoforte Holding. The interview, which lasted about 60 min, was conducted on an online platform. For data coding, three researchers independently and separately coded the information obtained from the interviews. Subsequently, the results obtained were compared for validity by adopting the open coding method (Strauss and Corbin, 2014); the raw data that emerged from the interviews were grouped within well-defined conceptual subcategories referring to the main themes explored. Additional documents were also analysed, including (1) the latest approved annual report outlining the strategic lines followed and (2) some articles published in national newspapers related to new technology trials conducted by the company. The use of more than one data source made it possible to triangulate the information and increased the reliability of the results that emerged during the interview.

3.3 Data analysis

Beginning with a conceptual model of digital entrepreneurship (Dutot and Van Horne, 2015) and adopting Nambisan's theoretical contribution (Nambisan *et al.*, 2019), the impact of digital platforms on TE was analysed (Figure 1).

More specifically, according to Dutot and Van Horne (2015), three main constructs influence digital entrepreneurial intention: agility, digital options and entrepreneurial characteristics. Entrepreneurial alertness, or the ability to recognise, create and take advantage of entrepreneurial opportunities, supports these constructs. Digital entrepreneurs (DEs) use virtual technologies to maintain relationships with customers, partners and suppliers. These relationships are used to innovate products, services and processes. Furthermore, DEs collect and store information using digital options with their knowledge management processes and



Source(s): Authors' illustration

Figure 1.
Theoretical framework

systems. These entrepreneurs tend to be characterised as young, educated and preferring to work for themselves while also recognising new opportunities through their use of social media.

Moreover, the study by Nambisan *et al.* (2019) considers three of the main themes related to innovation and entrepreneurship: openness, convenience and generativity. By openness, the authors refer to the nature and degree of openness facilitated by digital technologies in innovation and entrepreneurship in terms of who can participate, inputs, processes and outcomes. The term convenience refers to the action potential or possibilities offered by new digital technologies in relation to a specific user in innovation and entrepreneurship, e.g., digital offers, spatial offers, institutional offers and social offers. Finally, the authors refer to generativity, which is understood as the ability demonstrated by digital technologies to produce sudden changes by large, diverse, unrelated, unaccredited and uncoordinated entities/actors.

After examining entrepreneurial characteristics and objectives, this research focused on five important aspects when dealing with new technologies in support of entrepreneurship: (1) digital options of the company; (2) agility within the company; (3) openness in terms of the nature and degree of openness facilitated by digital technologies in innovation and entrepreneurship; (4) affordances, i.e., the potential for action or possibilities offered by technology to entrepreneurship; and (5) generativity, i.e., the demonstrated ability of digital technologies to produce sudden change.

The frameworks of Dutot and Van Horne (2015) and Nambisan *et al.* (2019) were adopted to formulate the questions for each category (see Table 1).

Entrepreneurial characteristics

1. What is your greatest strength as an entrepreneur? Have you always wanted to be your own boss?
2. What are the characteristics that led you to become an entrepreneur? What is your family background? Educational background?

Digital options

3. Why do you think digital is the best choice and why have you adopted new technologies?
4. How are your processes and in particular know your customer digitised?
5. How important is digital for you and your internal processes?

Agility

6. How do you adapt to changes in customer demand, new technologies and digital platforms? How do you exploit opportunities in terms of innovation?
7. Do you have specific partners to help you exploit your resources and knowledge?

Openness

8. What are the obstacles that undermine the balance between motivations and goals related to openness, innovation and entrepreneurship? How does digitisation help to address these obstacles?
9. How can digitisation stimulate internationalisation and facilitate collaboration between actors at social, ecosystem/industry/government level?

Affordances

10. How do new technologies improve the competitive position of the company? Do new technologies help the company to open up to new markets or customers?
11. To what extent does digitisation facilitate interactions of geographically and institutionally distant companies?
12. How are new digital technologies and infrastructures helping to redefine the boundaries of the business ecosystem and the behaviours of the actors that inhabit them?

Generativity

13. What are the potential (negative) consequences associated with digital platforms and infrastructures for individuals and society at large?
14. How should understanding these potential consequences influence digital strategies and policies at enterprise and ecosystem level?
15. How do new digital technologies impact on governance processes and individual/company behaviour?

Source(s): Authors' elaboration

Table 1. How does digitalisation support entrepreneurship in relation to business model innovation, decision-making process and corporate strategy? Interviews questions

4. Results

In this section, we present the emerging findings from the case study analysis, which allowed us to achieve the goal of our research.

First, we investigated the entrepreneurial characteristics of the founder of Yamamay Spa and CEO of Pianoforte Holding. Mr Cimmino has always wanted to be his own boss, acting on the front line and attempting to experiment and broaden his horizons, but above all, he believes in what he does and is trying to do it to the best of his ability. With an economic background and entrepreneurial experience inherited from his family, the entrepreneurial path of the CEO of Pianoforte Holding has always been characterised by curiosity and perseverance.

In an ever-changing market, the tendency to be “always connected” and the need to express preferences mean that the consumer is an important player in the design and choice of the product – right down to how it is received. To respond to changes in the market, and above all, to meet the needs of customers, the digitalisation process, first of the individual companies Carpisa and Yamamay and then of the entire Pianoforte Group, has been a continuous evolution. The digitalisation process has not only involved the Pianoforte Group companies and their shops but also their customers. To be in line with the new expectations of customers and the market, the company has chosen to open digital platforms, which represent channels of communication and interactions as well as sales. According to the interviewee, “*People expect to get in touch with a brand or a company in the way that is most convenient for them at a specific time, be it a shop, a computer, a smartphone*”. Therefore, a “*company’s strategy and ambition are to offer customers the possibility to experience the brand with the same quality across all touchpoints*”. The interviewee declared that he wants to optimise all contact points in the customer engagement process from a strategic point of view. Collecting and analysing consumer data are fundamental steps for the company. This begins with understanding customers’ expectations and needs and what they appreciate most. The profile and behavioural data collected in the customer journey are key to delivering rewarding services. The interviewee revealed that “*it’s not just about collecting and collating data, it’s about personalising the business relationship, making the customer the protagonist*”.

Given the many options available to entrepreneurs for product development, team building, distribution channels and payment options, the CEO of Pianoforte Group strongly believes in the potential of digital platforms. Furthermore, the interview revealed that digital platforms can simplify, save and optimise many internal processes, which is why the company is investing considerable resources in this direction in all areas of the company: from style and product development to administration and warehouse activities to the e-commerce platform. According to Mr Cimmino, “*in the near future, the market will be dominated by brands that are able to offer their customers a safe, engaging and personalised experience*”.

The interview revealed that change is part of business growth, which is constantly evolving and requires constant development towards the needs of its consumers. Indeed, technology should have a close link to delivering a better customer experience and improving business performance. With an in-house team dedicated to strategy development, the company works with external partners to ground and implement projects to offer customers new solutions. For instance, platforms for easy and mobile use, fast online checkout and deferred payment services are just some of the tools the company has implemented to meet the new customer needs.

Amongst the elements that have accelerated the digitalisation process of society, the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly played a crucial role. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many companies have been forced to move their operations from the physical world to the online world. According to the interviewee, “*the health emergency has highlighted the need to work more and more at 360°*”. While emphasising the importance of the human

relationship and the possibility of “*touching the desired product*”, the interviewee considers it essential to meet the needs of those “*who do not have the possibility of reaching the shops or who could not do so during the lockdown*”. For this reason, some Yamamay shops have added a consultancy service via WhatsApp provided by an expert saleswoman in e-commerce.

According to the interviewee, the whole concept of traditional retail has been and continues to be revised in this perspective, rationalising it and integrating it with a more omnichannel logic. The interview revealed that “*the real challenge is to allow the different channels to work synergistically*”. Digitalisation helps to be virtually present all over the world and to be truly global. In the examined case, due to digitisation, Yamamay and Carpisa currently have an e-commerce presence in more than 20 countries, and the company’s mission is to expand further. The interviewee revealed that entering a new country always involves a study of the most effective channels and platforms along with benefits for users. From this perspective, at the heart of the company’s mission is “*the transparent handling of sensitive customer data and great attention to customer privacy*”.

Regarding the advantages offered by new technologies to improve the company’s competitive position, the interview showed that digital platforms can improve competitiveness in the market because they allow the company to go viral, to respond adequately to customer requests and to attract a growing number of people interested in the products offered by the Pianoforte Group. The interviewee believes that one of the fundamental aspects of having a winning digital strategy is “*to use the same voice and personality in every sales/communication channel and to make the sales experience familiar and transparent for the customer, regardless of the channel they are using and the country they are in*”. Due to their ability to transcend physical boundaries, new technologies facilitate interactions between geographically and institutionally distant businesses, speeding up and streamlining customer care processes. Digital platforms make it possible to provide customers with comprehensive information on the production and manufacturing processes of products, making the buying experience more informed. The company’s short-term objective is to be able to exploit technology to provide customers with information on sustainability, traceability and the values that the product offered represents, creating two-way interactions outside the shop as well.

Based on what emerged from the interview, the main business challenge in approaching new technologies is to make the digital shopping experience increasingly personalised and on-demand. Indeed, new platforms allow for being “*to be always connected, informed and to be able to order anything directly from the sofa at home*”. Shops and e-commerce have different characteristics, but they are actually complementary: many customers see products online and then choose to buy them in the shop, or conversely, they pass in front of a shop window and then complete their purchase at home. According to the interviewee, “*the winning solution lies in the mutual integration of online and offline. The emergency caused by COVID-19 certainly anticipated this progress*”. The interviewee argued for an omnichannel approach, according to which a physical shop will have to be designed which works as a showroom for advice and buying tips but which is then completed and integrated with digital activity. In conclusion, the interview revealed that digital platforms are tools capable of supporting entrepreneurship in managing critical situations, simplifying and optimising business processes. To achieve this, a willingness to change is essential. In fact, as stated by the interviewee, “*digitalization is not only a combination of tools and strategies, it requires a business approach willing to change, and it is a process that includes a series of transformations: technological, organisational, creative and managerial*”.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Beginning with the positive correlation between entrepreneurship and digital technologies (Matricano, 2020b; Zhao, 2005), the aim of this study was to understand how new digital

platforms support TE, especially in the current market scenario, which is critical due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To this end, we used the case study methodology and conducted a semi-structured interview with the founder of Yamamay and the CEO of Pianoforte Group. To develop the interview questions, we used the theoretical frameworks developed by [Dutot and Van Horne \(2015\)](#) and [Nambisan *et al.* \(2019\)](#), which analyse the factors influencing entrepreneurial intention to undertake a digitisation process, particularly the use of digital platforms.

In particular, the findings reveal a significant contribution of digital platforms in fostering the entrepreneurial transformation process, prompting the company founder to overcome the COVID-19 crisis in retail by increasing the use of digital platforms to ensure its service to the community. In this sense, the entrepreneur addressed the negative consequences of a global problem by proposing a solution to the store closures imposed by the decrees. In this context, characterised by uncertainty, digital platforms have supported the entrepreneur in ensuring business continuity by creating direct contact with consumers. In fact, the ability of digital technologies to support entrepreneurs in how they deal with uncertainty is often discussed in the literature ([Nambisan, 2016](#)).

Digital platforms have enabled the company to improve the customer experience, consequently improving business performance, through dialogue via WhatsApp, which has proved particularly useful in meeting the needs of those who were unable to reach the stores or those who could not do so during the lockdown. Other advantages offered by new technologies include strengthening the company's competitive position and allowing the company to go viral, reaching more than 20 countries with its e-commerce, due to the adoption of digital channels and platforms. Instrumental to the adoption of entrepreneurial transformation is certainly the entrepreneur's attitude towards experimentation with new technologies. Specifically, the entrepreneur under investigation has always shown a high level of openness towards innovation and change due to the entrepreneurial experience inherited from his family marked by curiosity and perseverance.

Our findings are consistent with the prevailing literature that entrepreneurs' ability to always acquire new skills is instrumental to the implementation of new digital technologies ([Hansen, 2019](#)). Specifically, the importance of entrepreneurial know-how in identifying opportunities and developing new ventures is well known ([Brinckmann and Hoegl, 2011](#); [Dyer *et al.*, 2008](#)).

Therefore, it is clear that the digitisation process, including the adoption of digital platforms, involves a change in leadership, a different way of thinking, new business models and an increased use of technology to improve the experience of employees, customers, suppliers, partners and all company stakeholders. In general, many companies have focused on digital transformation in recent years and have set out to change their business culture and organisation, facing new business challenges, relating differently to customers and markets and using a different approach to conducting business. Several companies have attempted to play it by ear and use the wave of digital transformation to their advantage, as in the case examined, but most of them, while recognising the importance of digital transformation for the evolution of business, have seen any attempt at digitisation fail. The main reasons behind the failure in the digitisation process are related to the entrepreneurial mentality. In fact, because many Italian companies that have been operating in the market for many years have a consolidated business structure, business leaders struggle to be open to a new economic scenario. It is precisely the risk of seeing the balance maintained for years disappear that limits the digitisation process. In addition, business leaders, who are often embedded in the figure of the entrepreneur, are fundamental to the organisation and its success, yet many seem to believe that digital transformation projects are a waste of time. Finally, further limiting the digitisation process are resources, such as human, information and financial resources ([Matt *et al.*, 2015](#); [Sebastian *et al.*, 2017](#)). A typical

and very visible indicator of a large resource base is indeed the size of the company (Moker *et al.*, 2020).

In conclusion, the case analysed allowed for confirming the importance of a change-oriented business approach for the adoption of digital technologies as well as the instrumentality of digital platforms to the process of entrepreneurial transformation. In this sense, we provided an extension of the contributions that analyse the relationship between TE and digital platforms, providing preliminary results on how this type of technology has transformed and supported TE through a redefinition of strategic business choices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Theoretical and practical implications

This paper has both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, the study represents an extension of the existing literature on the topic (Soltanifar and Smailhodžić, 2021; Song, 2019; Troise, 2019). We explored the effect of entrepreneurial decisions on the adoption of digital platforms, responding to a call from existing studies to investigate questions related to the success, risks and failures of digital transformation for firms (Chrisanty *et al.*, 2021; Igwe, 2018). With this study, we show that an increased strategic focus on digital transformation leads to a better corporate response to crisis situations. Thus, we show that the adoption of digital platforms could ensure business continuity in times of crisis, especially regarding maintaining customer loyalty and satisfaction. At the same time, entrepreneurs need to be prepared for change and open to digitalisation (Chrisanty *et al.*, 2021).

In addition, our study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the effectiveness of TE as a tool that supports the organisation in developing new ideas and opportunities which enhance business performance and, consequently, increase stakeholder trust. The results of this study improve our understanding of how an entrepreneurial orientation towards digital platforms generates a dual benefit. On the one hand, it supports companies in managing the state of crisis, and on the other hand, it helps to improve performance.

Amongst the practical implications, our study provides evidence for both professionals who are undertaking a digital transformation experience and marketing experts. Specifically, this study offers an overview of the benefits of digital platforms in a crisis context, showing how this form of technology supports entrepreneurs in dealing with a changing situation in a timely manner. The case study could also serve as an example for other companies in the retail sector regarding how to manage the consequences of the pandemic.

In particular, the evidence obtained allows for a better understanding of how the pandemic has affected entrepreneurship, and in particular, how entrepreneurs have sought to respond to the global challenge of the pandemic while continuing to ensure the well-being of consumers. Furthermore, our study shows that digital platforms can contribute to successful leadership. To this end, business managers should encourage members of the organisation to achieve high levels of skills and experience in platform implementation. The management style should be more transformational, and managers should promote a shared vision. Specific actions must be taken to overcome internal and external obstacles to the shared vision. Using digital platforms, managers could have the ability to connect the organisation and the external environment.

7. Limitations and future research avenues

Amongst the limitations of the research, there is the impossibility of extending the results to the universe of businesses. As this is a single case study that refers to a specific sector, retail,

it is certainly not possible to state that digital platforms can support TE with reference to businesses in all sectors. To this end, it would be appropriate to investigate the effects of digitisation on entrepreneurship through the analysis of multiple cases to verify whether companies in the other sectors have adopted digital platforms differently and to understand what benefits they have obtained. More specifically, future research could investigate how digital platforms have supported TE to respond to the global challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, in different sectors and in the different European countries. In this sense, it will be possible to intercept possible additional factors (stemming from the location of enterprises) that encourage or limit the use of digital platforms. Furthermore, it would be interesting to understand how the characteristics of different entrepreneurs in terms of age and educational background, for example, could affect the adoption process of digital platforms and especially how different generations of entrepreneurs have reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A further limitation of our study is that the research was conducted with reference to Yamamay, which is part of Pianoforte Group. The future research can also be extended at group level to get data from top management such as board of directors.

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