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Reconceptualizing Entrepreneurial Marketing in the Age of Digital Commerce: The Case of China

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ABSTRACT

In the era of rapid digital transformation, traditional approaches to entrepreneurial marketing (EM) are increasingly being challenged by the rise of integrated digital commerce. This conceptual paper reconceptualizes EM by exploring how digital platforms, data analytics, and customer co-creation reshape entrepreneurial strategies, with a focus on the Chinese entrepreneurial ecosystem. Drawing from the Resource-Based View, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and Effectuation Theory, this study proposes a theoretical framework that positions digital resource capabilities and platform economies as core drivers of modern EM. It presents key propositions for future empirical validation and emphasizes the need for adaptive, innovation-driven, and customer-centric marketing approaches in the digital age. The paper contributes to the growing discourse on digital entrepreneurship by offering new insights into how entrepreneurs can achieve market responsiveness and scalability through digital commerce integration.

KEYWORDS: Entrepreneurial Marketing; Digital Commerce; Digital Entrepreneurship; Platform Economy

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, China has emerged as a global frontrunner in digital commerce innovation, driven by widespread internet penetration, mobile-first consumption behaviors, and the proliferation of platform-based business models. The digital commerce ecosystem in China is characterized by its rapid scale, dynamic consumer behavior, and the deep integration of social media, mobile payments, and data analytics. E-commerce giants such as Alibaba, JD.com, and Pinduoduo have transformed the retail landscape, while platforms like WeChat and Douyin (TikTok) enable real-time customer interaction, blurring the boundaries between marketing, sales, and customer service (Chen & Wang, 2023). In 2023 alone, China's e-commerce sales reached USD 2.3 trillion, accounting for nearly 47% of global online retail sales, reaffirming its dominant position in the digital commerce arena (Statista, 2024).

The rise of digital commerce in China has fundamentally reshaped the entrepreneurial environment, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Digital tools and platforms have lowered market entry barriers, facilitated direct access to consumers, and enabled resource-constrained entrepreneurs to scale operations rapidly (Wang et al., 2023). These developments have necessitated new marketing approaches that are adaptive, resource-efficient, and customer-focused—traits aligned with the principles of entrepreneurial marketing (EM). EM, as an emergent field at the intersection of entrepreneurship and marketing, emphasizes innovation, opportunity-seeking, and value creation under conditions of uncertainty (Kraus et al., 2022).

In the context of China's digital commerce boom, entrepreneurial marketing has gained heightened relevance. Unlike traditional marketing strategies that often rely on established processes and sizeable budgets, EM in digital ecosystems is characterized by agility, rapid experimentation, and leveraging digital platforms for real-time consumer engagement (Huang et al., 2022). Entrepreneurs in China frequently employ social commerce, influencer collaborations, and data-driven content strategies to generate market traction—strategies that align with EM's proactive, risk-taking, and customer-intensive nature (Yu et al., 2023). However, existing EM literature has largely focused on Western contexts and conventional industries, leaving a significant gap in understanding how EM is applied and reconceptualized in digitally-sophisticated markets such as China.

Thus, the convergence of entrepreneurial marketing principles with the fast-evolving digital commerce environment in China provides a fertile ground for theoretical expansion. There is a pressing need to examine how EM is being redefined by digital affordances, data technologies, and platform-driven ecosystems in China's unique socio-economic and cultural context. Addressing this gap can contribute significantly to both marketing theory and entrepreneurial practice in emerging digital economies.

Despite its growing relevance, entrepreneurial marketing (EM) remains a fragmented and evolving field, particularly in the context of digital commerce. Entrepreneurial marketing emerged as a response to the inadequacies of traditional marketing theories in addressing the dynamic, resource-constrained, and opportunity-driven nature of entrepreneurial ventures (Morris et al., 2002). While the field has matured over time with contributions delineating its dimensions—such as innovativeness, risk-taking, proactiveness, and customer intensity (Miles et al., 2015)—its adaptation to the digital era, especially within emerging economies like China, has not been conceptually unified or rigorously theorized.

The rapid transformation brought about by digital commerce platforms—ranging from e-marketplaces and mobile commerce to social selling and livestream shopping—has profoundly altered how entrepreneurs engage with customers, gather market intelligence, and create value (Kraus et al., 2022). However, much of the existing literature on EM does not fully reflect the structural shifts and affordances introduced by digital technologies. For instance, digital tools such as real-time analytics, algorithm-driven content delivery, and customer co-creation on platforms like WeChat or Douyin (TikTok China) necessitate rethinking the operational and strategic scope of EM. Yet, academic treatments of EM have not caught up with these realities, often treating digitalization as a peripheral enabler rather than a central construct (Rezvani et al., 2023).

Moreover, the unique characteristics of China's digital economy—such as high mobile penetration, government-supported fintech innovation, and the dominance of integrated ecosystems like Alibaba and Tencent—present a context where entrepreneurial marketing practices are often more hybridized and dynamic than those portrayed in Western EM models (Liu et al., 2021). This geographical and contextual variance underscores the inadequacy of a one-size-fits-all conceptual model of EM. There is a growing call in recent scholarship for a more localized and digitally aware reconceptualization of EM that integrates entrepreneurial behavior with platform-based commerce practices (Kraus et al., 2022; Schjoedt et al., 2023).

Therefore, this paper addresses a critical gap in the literature: the absence of a unified and contextually grounded conceptual framework that captures the intersection of entrepreneurial marketing and digital commerce. Without such a framework, both scholars and practitioners are left with disjointed theoretical guidance that may fail to inform or predict marketing success in digitally native entrepreneurial ventures. This problem is particularly urgent in the Chinese context, where digital commerce is not only prevalent but also structurally distinct from Western models, making it imperative to build conceptual clarity rooted in localized entrepreneurial realities.

In response to the transformative shifts brought about by digitalization and platform economies, this study seeks to reconceptualize entrepreneurial marketing (EM) within the context of digital commerce in China. Entrepreneurial marketing, traditionally characterized by innovation, risk-taking, proactiveness, customer focus, and resource leveraging (Morris et al., 2002), has been challenged by the rapid emergence of digitally mediated business models. The rise of digital commerce—encompassing e-commerce, mobile transactions, social commerce, and AI-driven customer engagement—demands a fresh theoretical lens through which to interpret EM behaviors and outcomes. Therefore, the central purpose of this study is to propose a conceptual framework that integrates entrepreneurial marketing principles with the dynamic and platform-driven nature of digital commerce in China's entrepreneurial ecosystem.

China provides a unique and fertile ground for this conceptual exploration. As the world's largest digital economy, it has nurtured an ecosystem where SMEs and entrepreneurs often leapfrog traditional business models to embrace platform-based and data-driven strategies (Liu et al., 2023). The ubiquity of super-apps such as WeChat, the growth of livestream commerce, and the integration of digital payment systems have redefined customer engagement, marketing channels, and entrepreneurial agility. Consequently, existing models of EM, which were largely developed in offline or Western-centric environments, may no longer capture the complex interdependencies between entrepreneurial behavior and digital affordances in the Chinese context.

This study aims to fill this theoretical void by developing a conceptual model that integrates the core constructs of entrepreneurial marketing with enabling factors of digital commerce—such as platform utilization, digital resource orchestration, customer co-creation, and real-time analytics. It further seeks to clarify how these components interact to influence entrepreneurial outcomes such as market responsiveness, innovation success, and customer relationship development. By drawing from relevant theories including the Resource-Based View

(Barney, 1991), Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Teece et al., 1997), and Effectuation Theory (Sarasvathy, 2001), the study offers a multi-theoretical foundation for understanding EM's evolving nature in the digital age.

The conceptual framework developed herein will serve as a blueprint for future empirical investigations and theoretical debates. It is intended not only to bridge gaps in existing literature but also to inform digital entrepreneurship practice and policy, particularly within emerging economies that mirror China's digital evolution. In essence, the study endeavors to provide a contemporary reconceptualization of EM that reflects the realities of digitized entrepreneurial ecosystems.

The rapid expansion of digital commerce in China has fundamentally reshaped how entrepreneurial firms interact with customers, manage value creation processes, and compete in increasingly technology-driven markets. In this evolving landscape, entrepreneurial marketing (EM) – traditionally defined as the proactive identification and exploitation of opportunities under conditions of uncertainty (Morris et al., 2002) – requires reconceptualization to reflect the dynamic capabilities required for digital engagement, data-driven decision-making, and platform-based business models. This conceptual paper aims to contribute significantly to the entrepreneurial marketing literature by addressing the theoretical void that exists in understanding EM within the unique context of China's digital commerce environment.

Despite a growing body of research on EM, there remains limited integration of digital commerce variables into established EM frameworks. Traditional EM theory emphasizes constructs such as innovation, customer intensity, risk-taking, value creation, and resource leveraging (Hills et al., 2008; Kraus et al., 2022). However, these frameworks often neglect the transformative role of digital platforms, data analytics, social media, and mobile commerce – elements that now dominate the entrepreneurial landscape, particularly in China. This paper proposes a new conceptual model that incorporates these digital elements, thereby enriching EM theory by offering a more contemporary lens for understanding marketing behavior in entrepreneurial firms operating in digital ecosystems. It also extends the theoretical conversation by integrating complementary perspectives from the dynamic capabilities view (Teece, 2018) and effectuation logic (Sarasvathy, 2001), emphasizing flexibility and resource recombination in unpredictable digital environments.

This study also holds strong practical implications for both entrepreneurs and policymakers. For entrepreneurs, the proposed framework serves as a strategic guide for leveraging digital tools in marketing activities to achieve growth and resilience. In particular, Chinese entrepreneurs operating in competitive and fast-changing digital commerce environments can benefit from understanding how EM practices must adapt to technological shifts and consumer behavior changes. For instance, the widespread use of livestreaming, influencer marketing, and customer co-creation in Chinese platforms such as Douyin (TikTok China) and Taobao illustrates the need for entrepreneurs to evolve beyond traditional EM approaches (Zhou & Wu, 2023).

For policymakers, this research highlights the importance of creating an enabling digital infrastructure that supports small businesses and startups in adopting entrepreneurial marketing strategies. Policies promoting digital literacy, access to e-commerce platforms, and data protection laws will directly influence how EM is practiced. Furthermore, supporting innovation ecosystems and entrepreneurship education that emphasizes digital capabilities can help foster sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems in emerging markets like China.

This conceptual exploration offers an integrative and future-oriented contribution to both theory and practice. It repositions entrepreneurial marketing within the realities of digital commerce, particularly in a context as advanced and complex as China's digital economy, thus creating a platform for further empirical research and strategic policymaking.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Entrepreneurial Marketing (EM)

Entrepreneurial Marketing (EM) has emerged as a vital paradigm within the broader fields of marketing and entrepreneurship, particularly in environments marked by uncertainty, innovation, and rapid technological transformation. Rooted in the need for smaller and resource-constrained firms to compete innovatively in dynamic markets, EM integrates the proactive, innovative, and opportunity-driven practices characteristic of entrepreneurship into marketing strategies (Hills et al., 2008; Bresciani et al., 2021). Unlike traditional marketing, which is often formal, research-driven, and resource-intensive, EM emphasizes informal, intuitive, and opportunity-seeking behaviors that align with the entrepreneurial mindset (Morrish, 2011).

The evolution of EM can be traced back to the late 1980s and early 1990s when scholars began to observe that many small firms and startups were practicing marketing in ways that deviated from conventional models (Stokes, 2000). This gave rise to the conceptual foundation of EM as a field distinct from mainstream marketing. Early definitions, such as those proposed by Morris et al. (2002), described EM as "an opportunistic perspective, driven by innovation and risk management, and an orientation towards the customer that is proactive and resource-leveraging." Over time, EM has gained traction not only among scholars but also practitioners, particularly in digital and platform-based economies where speed, adaptability, and customer intimacy are paramount (Kraus et al., 2022).

Several scholars have contributed to defining the core dimensions of EM, often reflecting the overlap with entrepreneurial orientation (EO). The most cited and empirically validated dimensions include innovation, proactiveness, risk-taking, opportunity focus, customer intensity, resource leveraging, and value creation (Morris et al., 2002; Bresciani et al., 2021). These dimensions are elaborated as follows:

Innovation refers to the constant pursuit of new products, services, processes, or business models. In EM, innovation is not limited to technological advancement but includes creative approaches to market engagement and value delivery (Kraus et al., 2022).

Proactiveness embodies the firm's ability to anticipate market trends and act on opportunities before competitors. This proactive stance enables firms to shape market dynamics rather than merely respond to them (Morrish & Deacon, 2011).

Risk-taking in EM reflects a willingness to engage in marketing strategies that may not have guaranteed outcomes. Entrepreneurs are often required to make swift decisions under uncertainty, and EM supports calculated risks as a means to market leadership (Hughes et al., 2020).

Customer intensity highlights the central role of customers in EM strategies. This dimension goes beyond customer orientation to involve co-creation, feedback integration, and emotional connection with the market (Bresciani et al., 2021). In the digital context, tools such as social listening, user-generated content, and personalized experiences have strengthened this intensity.

Overall, EM provides a dynamic and flexible framework for firms—especially startups and SMEs—to engage with rapidly evolving markets using non-traditional but effective approaches. As digital technologies increasingly influence consumer behavior and market structures, the conceptual relevance of EM continues to expand, calling for renewed theoretical articulation and empirical validation, especially in digitally saturated economies such as China.

B. Digital Commerce

Digital commerce, also known as e-commerce or electronic commerce, refers to the buying and selling of goods and services through digital channels, particularly the internet. In recent years, digital commerce has transcended traditional online retail models to encompass a broader ecosystem that includes social commerce, platform-based transactions, mobile payments, and big data-driven personalization. The accelerated evolution of digital technologies, particularly in emerging economies like China, has redefined how entrepreneurial firms interact with markets and customers.

One of the most defining features of digital commerce is the platform economy, which refers to the economic and social activity facilitated by digital platforms such as Alibaba, Amazon, and JD.com. These platforms serve as intermediaries connecting buyers and sellers, significantly lowering transaction costs and creating network effects that enhance scalability (Kenney & Zysman, 2020). In China, platform dominance is particularly evident in ecosystems like Alibaba's Taobao and Tmall, which integrate logistics, payments, and marketing services, offering entrepreneurs a comprehensive commercial infrastructure (Sun, 2023).

Another salient characteristic is mobile-first consumption. With mobile internet penetration exceeding 99% of internet users in China (CNNIC, 2023), mobile devices have become the primary channel for e-commerce engagement. This mobile-centric environment has influenced not only consumer behavior but also entrepreneurial strategies, compelling businesses to optimize content, payment, and customer interaction for mobile platforms. Mobile-first strategies also include the integration of digital wallets like Alipay and WeChat Pay, enabling seamless, real-time transactions (Zhao & Guo, 2022).

A third core feature of digital commerce is big data analytics. The ability to collect, analyze, and leverage consumer data in real time has become a competitive advantage for entrepreneurial firms. Digital commerce platforms facilitate the generation of large volumes of data related to browsing behavior, purchasing patterns, and customer feedback. Entrepreneurs can use this data to personalize offerings, predict demand, and refine marketing campaigns (Liu et al., 2021). This capability aligns with the entrepreneurial marketing paradigm that emphasizes agility, innovation, and customer-centricity.

China has emerged as a global leader in digital commerce innovation, driven by advanced infrastructure, widespread mobile usage, and supportive government policies. Livestream commerce (or live selling) is one of the most notable trends reshaping the digital marketing and sales landscape. Platforms such as Douyin (TikTok China) and Kuaishou enable real-time video broadcasting where influencers or sellers showcase products, interact with audiences, and drive immediate purchases. This format not only merges entertainment with commerce (known as "shoppertainment") but also enhances customer trust and engagement (Zhang et al., 2023).

WeChat commerce, or “WeCommerce,” is another integral aspect of China’s digital commerce ecosystem. It leverages the multifunctional WeChat app to integrate messaging, social media, and payments into a seamless shopping experience. Entrepreneurs and small businesses can create WeChat Mini Programs (lightweight apps within WeChat) to run stores, manage inventory, and engage in direct-to-consumer marketing without needing a separate website (Wang & Yu, 2022).

Moreover, Alibaba's ecosystem continues to shape digital entrepreneurship in China. Beyond e-commerce, Alibaba provides cloud computing, AI-driven analytics, and supply chain services that support business scalability. The integration of services like Alibaba Cloud and Cainiao logistics creates a digital infrastructure that facilitates real-time decision-making and efficient resource allocation for entrepreneurs (Gao & Liu, 2022).

These evolving trends indicate that digital commerce in China is not merely a channel for sales but a transformative business model that redefines marketing, operations, and customer interaction. As such, conceptualizing entrepreneurial marketing in this digitally intensive environment requires a rethinking of traditional marketing frameworks.

C. Intersection of EM and Digital Commerce

Entrepreneurial marketing (EM) has emerged as a critical paradigm in the study of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and startups, characterized by innovativeness, proactiveness, and customer-centric strategies deployed under conditions of uncertainty and limited resources (Morris, Schindehutte, & LaForge, 2002). At the same time, the rise of digital commerce has profoundly altered the ways in which entrepreneurial firms engage with markets, customers, and innovation processes. The intersection of EM and digital commerce marks a significant shift in entrepreneurial strategies, requiring an updated conceptual understanding of how digital technologies enable, shape, or constrain EM practices.

Digital commerce—encompassing e-commerce platforms, social commerce, mobile applications, and AI-enabled customer interaction tools—offers new affordances that expand the traditional scope of EM. Entrepreneurs now leverage data analytics, real-time customer feedback, digital storytelling, and multi-platform branding as central elements of their marketing strategies (Liguori et al., 2020). These capabilities enhance entrepreneurial agility, allowing firms to experiment quickly, personalize offerings, and scale rapidly through digital platforms (Kraus et al., 2022). For instance, livestream selling in China—a convergence of entertainment and commerce—represents a novel form of customer engagement, blending real-time interaction with transactional marketing (Chen et al., 2023).

Digital commerce fundamentally transforms core EM principles in several ways. First, it redefines customer value creation through co-creation processes on digital platforms (Sigala, 2020). Second, it amplifies the reach and immediacy of marketing actions, reducing the traditional costs associated with market entry and scaling. Third, it enables data-driven decision-making, where entrepreneurs adapt in near real-time based on algorithmic feedback and platform analytics. These transformations challenge earlier conceptualizations of EM, which emphasized intuition, informal market sensing, and physical proximity to customers (Hills, Hultman, & Miles, 2008; Morris et al., 2002).

Despite these developments, several gaps remain in the literature. First, while EM has been extensively studied in traditional or early digital contexts, its integration with advanced digital commerce practices—such as AI personalization, platform algorithms, and influencer ecosystems—has not been fully theorized (Kraus et al., 2022). Second, most existing models do not incorporate the dynamic interactions between entrepreneurs and digital platforms as mediating or moderating forces in marketing outcomes (Miles, Gilmore, Harrigan, & Carson, 2015). Third, research often remains fragmented across EM and digital marketing domains, lacking a unified framework that reflects the hybrid nature of entrepreneurial digital commerce practices, particularly in emerging markets like China (Li, Wei, & Yang, 2021).

Moreover, contextual differences—such as consumer behavior in digital ecosystems, regulatory environments, and cultural expectations—are underexplored in EM literature. Given China's unique digital commerce infrastructure (e.g., WeChat Pay, Alibaba ecosystem), a localized conceptualization of EM in digital commerce is urgently needed. This paper responds to these gaps by proposing an integrated conceptual model that situates EM within the digital commerce ecosystem, with a particular focus on the Chinese context.

III. METHODOLOGY

D. Theoretical Foundations

In understanding entrepreneurial marketing (EM) within the fast-evolving digital commerce environment, particularly in the context of China, it is essential to anchor the discussion in robust theoretical perspectives. Three prominent theories offer critical lenses to conceptualize how entrepreneurial firms adapt, exploit resources, and innovate in dynamic digital ecosystems: Dynamic Capabilities Theory, the Resource-Based View (RBV), and Effectuation Theory.

Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT), originally formulated by Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997), posits that in rapidly changing environments, the ability of firms to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies is key to achieving and sustaining competitive advantage. In the context of digital commerce, especially within China's fast-paced platform economy, entrepreneurial firms are constantly exposed to shifting consumer preferences, technological disruptions, and platform-based market structures. Dynamic capabilities—such as sensing opportunities, seizing them through rapid innovation, and transforming organizational processes—become essential for survival and growth (Teece, 2018).

Entrepreneurial marketing practices inherently embody dynamic behaviors. For instance, Chinese digital entrepreneurs often engage in continuous iteration of marketing strategies based on real-time data and customer feedback. The rise of livestream commerce, social selling, and platform-based personalization (e.g., via Alibaba's AI-driven targeting) exemplifies how firms leverage dynamic capabilities to maintain responsiveness and relevance (Wang & Kim, 2022).

The Resource-Based View (RBV) suggests that firm-specific resources—if valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN)—form the basis for sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). In the context of EM and digital commerce, resources may include technological assets (e.g., proprietary algorithms, big data systems), human capital (e.g., digitally literate entrepreneurial teams), and intangible assets such as brand equity or customer trust in digital spaces.

RBV provides a useful framework for examining how entrepreneurs exploit internal capabilities to innovate marketing approaches in digital contexts. For example, entrepreneurial firms in China that successfully integrate WeChat ecosystems, leverage platform data analytics, and build digital trust with customers often achieve superior market performance (Zhou & Wu, 2023). This view also complements dynamic capabilities by emphasizing the foundational assets that entrepreneurs must possess or develop to enact adaptive strategies.

Effectuation Theory, introduced by Sarasvathy (2001), offers a distinctive logic of entrepreneurial action under conditions of uncertainty. Rather than relying on predictive strategies, effectual entrepreneurs begin with available means—who they are, what they know, and whom they know—and iteratively co-create opportunities with stakeholders. This theory is particularly relevant in digital commerce settings where uncertainty and experimentation are inherent.

Chinese entrepreneurs engaging in EM often operate with limited resources, yet they creatively experiment with low-cost digital channels (e.g., TikTok/Douyin, mini-programs) to test and evolve their value propositions. Effectuation aligns with EM by emphasizing iterative learning, affordable loss, and leveraging contingencies—principles that guide many startups in the Chinese digital ecosystem (Li et al., 2023). It also explains the rapid evolution of marketing tactics in response to platform changes and customer interaction.

E. Conceptual Framework

The reconceptualization of entrepreneurial marketing (EM) within the context of digital commerce necessitates a nuanced understanding of various interlinked constructs that influence marketing behavior in digitally enabled entrepreneurial ecosystems. This section explores four core components that form the foundation of the proposed conceptual framework: Entrepreneurial Orientation, Digital Resource Capabilities, Market Responsiveness, and Customer Co-creation via Platforms.

Entrepreneurial orientation is a foundational construct in entrepreneurial marketing, reflecting the strategic posture of a firm towards innovation, proactiveness, and risk-taking (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Within the rapidly evolving digital commerce landscape, EO plays a pivotal role in how firms exploit technological changes to create market opportunities. Recent studies have shown that EO significantly influences a firm's digital marketing effectiveness and adaptability in volatile environments (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2023). Firms with strong EO are more likely to experiment with emerging technologies, adopt digital sales channels, and proactively engage with consumers through digital touchpoints (Kraus et al., 2022). In China's digital ecosystem, where platforms such as WeChat and Douyin dominate, EO enables entrepreneurs to strategically position their offerings, respond swiftly to market signals, and leverage new digital trends to outperform competitors.

Digital resource capabilities refer to a firm's ability to effectively acquire, integrate, and deploy digital technologies to support marketing and operational activities. These capabilities include the use of big data analytics, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and mobile platforms (Bharadwaj et al., 2013; Huang et al., 2021). In digital commerce, such capabilities allow for real-time customer insights, personalized marketing, and efficient logistics. As observed in China's highly digitized market, SMEs with advanced digital resource capabilities can reduce transaction costs, increase scalability, and enhance customer experience. Scholars argue that digital capabilities not only serve as enablers but also act as strategic assets that complement the entrepreneurial orientation of the firm (Vial, 2019; Nambisan et al., 2021). Hence, digital resource capabilities are essential for entrepreneurial firms to innovate and deliver value within a highly networked commerce environment.

Market responsiveness is defined as the firm's ability to rapidly adapt to changing customer needs and competitive dynamics (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993). In entrepreneurial marketing, market responsiveness underlines the agility and flexibility required to stay relevant in fluid digital markets. The increasing velocity of change in customer preferences, driven by real-time feedback and social media, necessitates that firms develop mechanisms to sense, interpret, and act upon market signals. In the Chinese context, where consumer behavior evolves rapidly due to social commerce trends, firms must be exceptionally responsive to capitalize on fleeting opportunities. Contemporary research has highlighted that responsiveness is often enhanced by digital platforms that provide analytics dashboards, sentiment tracking, and AI-driven decision support (Nguyen et al., 2022). Therefore, market responsiveness is not only an outcome of entrepreneurial alertness but also a function of technological embedding within firm operations.

Customer co-creation refers to the active involvement of customers in the design, development, and delivery of products or services (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). With the advent of digital platforms, co-creation has become increasingly interactive and scalable. Platforms such as Alibaba's Tmall, Xiaohongshu, or even livestreaming services allow consumers to participate in marketing content creation, product innovation, and brand advocacy (Zhu et al., 2023). In entrepreneurial marketing, co-creation enhances brand legitimacy and fosters a community-based marketing approach. Furthermore, digital platforms facilitate two-way value creation, where entrepreneurs gain valuable market intelligence while customers enjoy personalized and engaging brand experiences. This reciprocal process strengthens customer relationships and contributes to sustainable competitive advantage. Recent literature emphasizes the growing importance of co-creation in platform ecosystems, especially in culturally dynamic and technologically mature markets like China (Li et al., 2021).

The evolution of digital technologies has reshaped the landscape in which entrepreneurial marketing (EM) operates, particularly in rapidly digitizing economies such as China. This section discusses three key theoretical propositions that emerge from the intersection of entrepreneurial marketing and digital commerce. Each proposition is grounded in current scholarly literature and reflects the dynamic interplay of innovation, data analytics, and digital platform ecosystems in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes.

Digital commerce capabilities refer to a firm's ability to leverage digital platforms, tools, and infrastructures—such as mobile commerce, cloud computing, and digital payment systems—to streamline operations and engage customers (Gupta & Kohli, 2022). These capabilities are central to enhancing the innovativeness dimension of EM, which emphasizes experimentation, creativity, and the rapid deployment of new market offerings (Hills et al., 2008).

Firms operating in digital commerce ecosystems are more likely to innovate their marketing practices due to real-time feedback mechanisms, lower experimentation costs, and broader access to diverse customer bases (Kraus et al., 2022). For example, the use of AI-powered recommendation engines and interactive social commerce features encourages entrepreneurs to continuously reconfigure their marketing strategies. In China, where e-commerce platforms like Alibaba and JD.com dominate, the ability to embed innovative features such as livestreaming and short video content into marketing campaigns has become a key differentiator (Zhou et al., 2023).

The ability to collect, analyze, and act on customer data is now an essential competency for firms operating in digital environments. Customer data analytics enables entrepreneurs to generate granular insights into consumer behavior, preferences, and purchase intentions, thereby enhancing EM effectiveness (Chatterjee et al., 2021). This analytics capability is especially critical in high-velocity markets, where timely and accurate insights can make the difference between strategic success and failure.

Recent studies suggest that data-driven decision-making significantly enhances marketing performance, especially in entrepreneurial firms that are resource-constrained and must prioritize efficiency (Sarma et al., 2022). When integrated with EM, customer data analytics facilitates more precise targeting, personalized engagement, and quicker iteration of marketing campaigns—factors that are strongly associated with superior business performance.

Accordingly, we propose that customer data analytics acts as a mediator in the relationship between entrepreneurial marketing and firm performance, amplifying the impact of EM strategies through informed execution.

The platform economy—characterized by multi-sided digital platforms facilitating interactions between producers and consumers—has become a dominant force in digital commerce (Kenney & Zysman, 2020). These platforms, such as Taobao, Pinduoduo, and TikTok in China, offer unparalleled scalability and access to large user bases, effectively lowering entry barriers for entrepreneurs.

However, the effectiveness of EM in reaching broader markets can vary depending on how well a firm navigates and leverages these platforms. Entrepreneurs with a deep understanding of platform algorithms, community norms, and monetization structures can optimize their marketing reach significantly (Wang & Zhang, 2022). Conversely, firms that lack such capabilities may experience limited visibility despite innovative marketing strategies.

Therefore, we posit that the platform economy moderates the relationship between EM and market reach, such that EM strategies are more effective in expanding market access when aligned with platform-specific mechanisms and affordances.

IV. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

F. Theoretical Implications

The emergence of digital commerce platforms has catalyzed a reconfiguration of Entrepreneurial Marketing (EM) theories, prompting the need to expand beyond traditional boundaries. Historically, EM has been characterized by innovation, proactiveness, calculated risk-taking, opportunity focus, and customer intensity—traits closely aligned with entrepreneurial orientation (Hills et al., 2008; Morris et al., 2002). However, in the current digital landscape, these traits manifest in new ways, requiring a reconceptualization of EM theory to accommodate rapidly evolving technological contexts.

In particular, the traditional view of EM as informal and resource-constrained is increasingly being challenged. Digital commerce in China—enabled by platforms such as Alibaba, Douyin, and WeChat—offers low-cost yet high-reach avenues for entrepreneurial activities, thus blurring the lines between formal and informal marketing tactics (Liu et al., 2021). Entrepreneurs now operate within algorithmically mediated environments where data-driven personalization, content virality, and social commerce dominate. This evolution necessitates expanding the theoretical foundations of EM to account for these platform-specific dynamics and digitally enhanced market responsiveness.

Furthermore, the digital economy redefines the locus of innovation in EM from internal product development to co-creation with consumers and partners. Consumer participation in brand narratives through user-generated content (UGC), livestreaming, and interactive campaigns exemplifies this shift (Zhao et al., 2023). As a result, EM strategies are becoming increasingly dialogic, agile, and co-constructed, suggesting a move toward what may be termed "platform-embedded entrepreneurial marketing."

Digital affordances—defined as actionable possibilities enabled by digital technologies—play a crucial role in transforming EM strategies (Faraj & Azad, 2012). These affordances, such as automation, real-time analytics, social sharing, and hyper-targeted advertising, significantly alter how entrepreneurs engage customers, gather market intelligence, and scale operations. In the context of China's digital commerce ecosystem, these affordances are not merely tools but foundational enablers of marketing innovation.

For example, entrepreneurs increasingly leverage data-driven customization enabled by AI-powered recommender systems on e-commerce platforms like Taobao and JD.com to deliver individualized consumer experiences. This integration of digital affordances supports an effectual logic in marketing—testing, learning, and iterating quickly based on consumer feedback and behavioral data (Sarasvathy, 2001; Nambisan, 2017). It also supports real-time experimentation, a capability previously unavailable in traditional EM contexts.

Moreover, the boundaryless nature of digital platforms allows for scalability and instant feedback loops that redefine opportunity recognition and exploitation, central to EM theory (Fischer & Reuber, 2011). Consequently, entrepreneurial marketing in the digital age requires a reconceptualization of value co-creation, customer engagement, and brand community building as continual, dynamic, and platform-mediated processes.

Thus, integrating digital affordances into EM frameworks suggests that future EM theory must incorporate constructs such as platform dynamics, algorithmic visibility, and digital consumer co-production. The reconceptualization proposed in this paper not only aligns with recent advancements in digital entrepreneurship but also positions EM as a flexible, iterative, and tech-mediated strategic approach.

G. Managerial Implications

In the digital commerce era, entrepreneurial marketing (EM) offers an essential strategic toolkit for digital entrepreneurs and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) aiming to survive and thrive in highly dynamic and competitive markets. As digital technologies continue to reshape customer behavior, distribution channels, and value creation mechanisms, managers must reconsider conventional marketing strategies and adopt more flexible, innovation-driven approaches aligned with entrepreneurial marketing principles (Kraus et al., 2022). This reconceptualization is especially vital for SMEs in China, where rapid digitization, mobile-first platforms, and an ecosystem of super-apps like WeChat and Alibaba's Taobao provide both unprecedented opportunities and complex challenges.

First, digital entrepreneurs and SME managers must enhance customer engagement capabilities through platform-mediated interactions. Entrepreneurial marketing in digital contexts requires real-time responsiveness, co-creation, and personalized experiences. For instance, livestreaming commerce, a booming trend in China, offers SMEs a direct channel to engage customers emotionally and authentically. Managers must thus invest in content-based marketing capabilities and storytelling techniques that reflect the brand's entrepreneurial identity (Guo et al., 2023).

Second, the strategic use of data analytics is imperative for opportunity recognition and performance optimization. Entrepreneurial marketers should leverage customer data not only to segment markets more precisely but also to iterate product development in response to shifting consumer demands. In this regard, SMEs should develop a culture of experimentation and agility, where marketing decisions are driven by actionable insights generated from digital platforms (Liu & Yang, 2022).

Third, resource constraints common to SMEs can be addressed through digital ecosystems that lower transaction costs and enable scalability. Digital platforms act as intermediaries that connect producers and consumers at scale, reducing the need for significant capital investment in traditional infrastructure. Entrepreneurial marketing in this setting emphasizes value creation through partnerships, social influence, and customer advocacy. Managers should actively participate in platform ecosystems, such as JD.com or Pinduoduo, while strategically managing reputational capital and customer feedback loops (Zhang & Yuan, 2021).

Finally, this reconceptualized EM model requires managers to foster dynamic capabilities, especially in terms of sensing, seizing, and transforming opportunities in digital markets. As the business environment in China continues to evolve—through policy changes, AI integration, and market saturation—SMEs must be equipped to continually adjust their marketing configurations. Training programs in digital literacy and entrepreneurial agility should be institutionalized to ensure that both leadership and operational teams can cope with rapid change (Teece et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2023).

Digital entrepreneurs and SME managers must transition from traditional, linear marketing logic to a more iterative, data-informed, and customer-centric marketing approach. Entrepreneurial marketing in digital commerce is not merely an operational tool—it is a strategic imperative that intertwines innovation, digitalization, and market orientation to create sustainable competitive advantages.

H. Policy Implications

As China positions itself at the forefront of global digital commerce, the integration of entrepreneurial marketing (EM) within digital ecosystems demands robust policy frameworks. From platform governance to data infrastructure, the intersection of entrepreneurial innovation and digital commerce raises pressing questions for policymakers. In the context of reconceptualizing EM, this study emphasizes two primary policy domains: (1) strengthening digital infrastructure to support entrepreneurial scalability, and (2) ensuring coherent regulatory mechanisms that both promote innovation and protect market fairness.

Digital infrastructure serves as the backbone of entrepreneurial agility in a platform-driven economy. The proliferation of mobile internet, 5G networks, cloud computing, and data analytics tools has dramatically reshaped how entrepreneurs in China reach and engage with consumers (Liu et al., 2021). These technological assets enable real-time market sensing, targeted promotional campaigns, and seamless transactions—core components of entrepreneurial marketing.

However, a digital divide still exists between urban and rural regions, creating disparities in the capacity of micro-entrepreneurs to leverage digital tools. To mitigate this, the Chinese government has invested heavily in the "Digital China" strategy, which includes expanding broadband and mobile internet access, especially in Tier 3 and Tier 4 cities (State Council of China, 2022). These infrastructural improvements are essential to democratize access to entrepreneurial platforms such as Pinduoduo and Douyin (TikTok China), which rely on stable and accessible networks.

From a policy perspective, continued investments in nationwide digital infrastructure should prioritize inclusive access, data interoperability, and platform integration standards. Policies fostering open APIs and public-private collaborations on cloud-based entrepreneurial tools can further empower EM practices (Zhao & Huang, 2023). Ensuring that digital infrastructure aligns with entrepreneurs' marketing needs—such as AI-based customer engagement or cross-border logistics systems—is critical for sustaining China's digital economy growth.

While infrastructure lays the technical foundation, regulatory frameworks determine the operational legitimacy and sustainability of entrepreneurial marketing efforts. The rise of platform-based entrepreneurship in China has sparked concerns over data privacy, consumer rights, and platform monopolies. Entrepreneurs engaging in digital commerce must navigate an increasingly complex regulatory landscape involving the Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL), Anti-Monopoly Law amendments, and e-commerce-specific guidelines (Chen & Lin, 2022).

These regulations directly affect EM practices, especially those relying on personalized data-driven marketing, influencer collaborations, and digital payments. For instance, under the PIPL, entrepreneurs must obtain informed consent for data collection, which complicates real-time marketing analytics. Additionally, the Anti-Monopoly Law's scrutiny of platform operators such as Alibaba and Meituan influences how entrepreneurial marketers access consumer traffic and platform services (Wang, 2023).

To reconcile innovation with regulation, policymakers should develop sandbox environments for SMEs and startups, allowing for experimentation with emerging EM tools in a controlled legal space. Furthermore, regulatory clarity is needed in areas such as livestream e-commerce, cross-border data flows, and digital intellectual property rights. Transparent guidelines and streamlined compliance procedures would reduce entrepreneurial uncertainty and enhance the legitimacy of digital marketing initiatives.

The success of entrepreneurial marketing in the age of digital commerce is not merely a function of individual entrepreneurial capabilities but is also contingent upon enabling digital infrastructure and responsive regulatory frameworks. For China to maintain its edge in digital innovation, policy reforms must strike a balance between promoting entrepreneurial dynamism and ensuring responsible governance of digital ecosystems. A coordinated policy agenda that addresses infrastructural disparities and regulatory ambiguities will be pivotal in redefining the entrepreneurial marketing landscape.

I. Suggestions for Empirical Testing and Future Research Directions

The first avenue for future research lies in the empirical validation of the proposed conceptual framework. While conceptual papers play a critical role in theorizing and model-building, subsequent empirical research is necessary to test the relationships among constructs, assess model fit, and refine theoretical linkages. Quantitative methods such as structural equation modeling (SEM) or partial least squares (PLS-SEM) could be employed to test hypotheses derived from this model using survey data collected from digital entrepreneurs across various Chinese provinces. Additionally, longitudinal studies could be particularly beneficial to observe how entrepreneurial marketing practices evolve over time in response to technological changes and market disruptions (Kraus et al., 2022; Martins et al., 2023). Empirical validation would also help determine whether platform-mediated customer engagement and digital capabilities significantly moderate or mediate entrepreneurial outcomes, thus strengthening the conceptual claims made in this paper.

Entrepreneurial marketing in the context of digital commerce manifests differently across sectors due to industry-specific dynamics, consumer behavior, and regulatory constraints. Future research could delve into sector-specific explorations, particularly in emerging industries such as tech startups, agritech, and rural e-commerce. For instance, China’s rural revitalization initiatives and digital infrastructure investments have catalyzed a unique ecosystem for e-commerce entrepreneurship in rural areas (Wang & Zhang, 2023). Investigating how rural entrepreneurs utilize EM strategies on platforms like Pinduoduo or Douyin (TikTok China) can offer insights into localized adaptations of marketing practices. Likewise, studies focused on high-tech startups can reveal how innovation-driven ventures employ lean digital marketing strategies, real-time data analytics, and customer co-creation in resource-constrained environments. Such sector-specific inquiries will not only validate but also contextualize the framework, adding granularity and relevance to the theoretical propositions.

To generalize and globalize the conceptual insights derived from the Chinese context, future research could undertake comparative studies across countries with varying degrees of digital maturity and entrepreneurial ecosystems. For instance, comparing China with other Asian economies such as India, Indonesia, or South Korea could reveal both convergences and divergences in EM usage patterns. Additionally, juxtaposing China’s EM practices with those in Western economies, where digital commerce operates under different consumer expectations and regulatory frameworks, could expand theoretical boundaries and highlight contextual contingencies (Schindehutte & Morris, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023). These cross-country studies may explore how institutional environments, cultural norms, and technological infrastructure shape entrepreneurial marketing strategies differently. Such comparative research would contribute to the development of a more global and nuanced theory of entrepreneurial marketing in the digital age.

V. CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper has sought to reconceptualize entrepreneurial marketing (EM) within the rapidly evolving digital commerce ecosystem, specifically in the context of China's dynamic entrepreneurial environment. Drawing upon foundational theories such as the Resource-Based View (RBV), Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and Effectuation Theory, this study contributes to the theoretical advancement of EM by integrating digital commerce as a central context for its development and application.

First, this paper proposes a refined framework that situates digital platforms, data analytics, and customer co-creation as pivotal enablers of modern EM strategies. Unlike traditional EM frameworks that emphasized limited resources and informal marketing tactics (Hills et al., 2008), this study posits that digital commerce tools—such as mobile commerce platforms, social media integration, and livestreaming—expand entrepreneurial capabilities in targeting, engaging, and retaining customers. Second, the conceptual model introduced herein extends the EM discourse by incorporating digital resource capabilities as a strategic asset, aligning with the recent call for a deeper understanding of how EM adapts in technologically driven contexts (Kraus et al., 2022).

Furthermore, this paper introduces testable propositions that highlight the mediating and moderating effects of digital capabilities and platform economies on entrepreneurial performance. These contributions not only offer a theoretically grounded expansion of EM constructs but also lay the foundation for future empirical studies exploring digital entrepreneurship in emerging markets like China.

In light of the ongoing digital transformation, particularly in high-growth economies such as China, the traditional assumptions of EM warrant a fundamental reevaluation. The emergence of digital commerce platforms (e.g., Alibaba, JD.com, WeChat Mini Programs) has redefined how entrepreneurs conceptualize customer relationships, market entry strategies, and innovation processes. Digital ecosystems enable micro and small entrepreneurs to scale operations, co-create with users, and harness real-time market intelligence at unprecedented levels (Li et al., 2023). These developments challenge the classical EM view that emphasized offline, resource-constrained, and informality-driven marketing behavior.

Moreover, the growing convergence between digital commerce and entrepreneurial activity necessitates a shift from a linear marketing model to a more dynamic, adaptive, and data-informed approach. Entrepreneurs today operate within algorithmically shaped environments where consumer attention is fragmented, and personalization is a key determinant of competitiveness (Baluku et al., 2022). Therefore, reconceptualizing EM to include agility in digital experimentation, platform-based innovation, and digital customer journey mapping is essential to remain theoretically and practically relevant.

Ultimately, this conceptualization highlights the pressing need for both scholars and practitioners to engage in a more nuanced understanding of EM in the digital age. Future empirical inquiries should validate the proposed framework across different sectors and scales to refine the boundaries and capabilities of EM in digitally dominated markets.

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