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Artificial Intelligence and Entrepreneurship

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Artificial Intelligence and Entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

Advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have brought the world to the threshold of significant new technological breakthroughs. These developments bring new opportunities and challenges to existing and potential entrepreneurs, raising pressing and promising research questions. We review emerging but fast-growing literature on impacts of AI on entrepreneurship, providing a resource for researchers in entrepreneurship and neighboring disciplines. We begin with a review of definitions of AI and show that ambiguity and broadness of definitions adopted in empirical studies may result in obscured evidence on impacts of AI on entrepreneurship. Against this background, we present and discuss existing theories and evidence on how AI technologies affect entrepreneurial opportunities and decision-making under uncertainty, the adoption of AI technologies by startups, entry barriers, and the performance of entrepreneurial businesses. We add an original empirical analysis of survey data

from the German Socio-economic Panel revealing that entrepreneurs, particularly those with employees, are aware of and use AI technologies significantly more frequently than paid employees. Next, we discuss how AI may affect entrepreneurship indirectly through impacting local and sectoral labor markets. The reviewed evidence suggests that AI technologies that are designed to automate jobs are likely to result in a higher level of necessity entrepreneurship in a region, whereas AI technologies that transform jobs without necessarily displacing human workers increase the level of opportunity entrepreneurship. More generally, AI impacts regional entrepreneurship ecosystems (EE) in multiple ways by altering the importance of existing EE elements and processes, creating new ones, and potentially reducing the role of geography for entrepreneurship. Lastly, we address the question of how the regulation of AI may affect the entrepreneurship landscape by focusing on the case of the European Union and its data protection and AI legislation. We conclude our survey by discussing implications for entrepreneurship research and policy.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence; machine learning; entrepreneurship; AI startups; digital entrepreneurship; opportunity; innovation; entrepreneurship ecosystem; digital entrepreneurship ecosystem; AI regulation.

JEL Codes: J24, L26, O30.

1

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) transforms, destroys and creates human occupations and brings new opportunities and challenges to existing and potential entrepreneurs. AI may create new business opportunities for entrepreneurs (Shepherd and Majchrzak, 2022), but also push individuals into self-employment whose prior wage jobs are automated through the implementation of AI. AI startups such as DeepL are developing AI products that seem to be able to compete against tech giants like Amazon or Google (Weber *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, other self-employed individuals and independent contractors feel threatened, such as writers in Hollywood, whose 2023 strike was partially motivated by concerns that studios may employ AI to create movie and television scripts.

In a Delphi study, Van Gelderen *et al.* (2021) asked 175 editors and Editorial Review Board members of the academic journals *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* (ETP) and *Journal of Business Venturing* what they think entrepreneurship will look like in 2030. AI is among the themes mentioned most often by the experts.¹ The authors

¹We note that AI is not a new phenomenon. A search for the terms “AI” and “artificial intelligence” using the Google Ngram Viewer tool and the corpus of English publications reveals that there was a significant increase in the interest in AI already

conclude that one of the main future research questions in the field of entrepreneurship concerns how AI may affect the types of entrepreneurial ventures emerging and their performance. In particular, they raise the questions of how, why, and under what conditions AI might complement and support entrepreneurial activity or substitute for entrepreneurial judgement, perhaps even replacing the entrepreneur in the future.² While the literature on the AI-entrepreneurship nexus started before 2020, the global Covid-19 pandemic crisis substantially contributed to the spread of digital technologies and also spurred research on the impacts of AI on startups (Sorgner, 2023).

In this review, we discuss how extant literature in multiple disciplines including economics and management describes the direct and indirect impacts of AI on entrepreneurship. We start our survey with a discussion of common definitions of AI and argue that wording matters for designing empirical research as well as government regulation of AI.

In terms of direct impact, AI technologies have been identified as external enablers and facilitators of entrepreneurship (Davidsson *et al.*, 2020; Obschonka and Audretsch, 2020; Chalmers *et al.*, 2021; Davidsson and Sufyan, 2023). Innovative entrepreneurs discover and create new business opportunities using AI, and AI may reduce costs such as labor costs (through automation) and financing costs (through fintech services). Due to their prediction abilities, AI systems may help to resolve challenges of uncertainty and thereby create new possibilities of entrepreneurial action (Townsend and Hunt, 2019), but AI may also have fundamental limitations in dealing with uncertainty (Townsend *et al.*, 2023). Recent literature reports that AI deployment has become increasingly important in the development of digital entrepreneurship, in identifying and acquiring knowledge, in customizing products and services as a competitive entrepreneurial strategy, and in managing product innovation (Mariani *et al.*, 2023). Generative AI such as ChatGPT can

during the 1960s, with a further surge in the 1980s culminating at around 1986. After that year, a strong decline in the trend followed that stabilized during the 1990s. A recent and still ongoing trend of an exponentially growing interest in AI started roughly after the year 2014.

²A call for paper proposals for a special issue of ETP on transformative AI and entrepreneurship is open until January 31, 2026 (<https://www.entrepreneurship-ex-machina.org/>).

support creative tasks such as pitching entrepreneurial business ideas to investors or generating business ideas (Short and Short, 2023; Boussioux *et al.*, 2024). An important emerging theme is that AI plays a key role in (digital) entrepreneurial ecosystems (Acs *et al.*, 2022; Wurth *et al.*, 2023) by facilitating information sharing, creating and diffusing new products, and fostering innovation.

Due to the novelty of the phenomenon, most papers on the AI-entrepreneurship nexus have been conceptual, while few papers present evidence from surveys (e.g., Bessen *et al.*, 2022; McElheran *et al.*, 2024) or experiments (e.g., Otis *et al.*, 2024). In this review, we supplement this literature by providing new survey evidence on how the self-employed use AI and are exposed to AI based on the German Socio-economic Panel (Fedorets *et al.*, 2022).

Advances in AI may also have indirect impacts on entrepreneurship when AI affects the labor market more broadly. Some individuals are pushed into self-employment due to a lack of alternatives available to them. The number of such necessity entrepreneurs may increase if jobs are automated and workers are displaced by AI. We discuss various empirical measures of the impact of AI on occupations and continue by reviewing evidence of consequences of AI for the labor market and entry into different types of entrepreneurship (Fossen and Sorgner, 2021, 2022). As AI affects occupations, the impacts vary across regions depending on regional occupational structures, which creates challenges and opportunities for regional policymaking (Fossen *et al.*, 2022a). The rapid advances made in AI technologies, which have raised many concerns about the future of work, have led many countries and regions, most notably the European Union, to develop and implement sometimes very strict regulations of AI. We discuss likely impacts on the level and nature of AI entrepreneurship.

We conclude our review by deriving central questions for future entrepreneurship research. Do emerging government regulations of AI support entrepreneurs or keep them from achieving their goals? What are the right conditions – in terms of an entrepreneurial ecosystem – that allow entrepreneurs to put AI to beneficial use and to avoid potential harm to society? (Baumol, 1996) With our review we aim to take stock of what scholars have learned about the impact of AI on entrepreneurship,

discuss potential policy implications, identify knowledge gaps, and provide avenues for further research in this rapidly growing research area.

The scope of this review is defined by the various impacts AI may have on entrepreneurship. Obschonka and Fisch (2022) identify two main areas of intersection between AI and entrepreneurship research: AI in entrepreneurship as a research topic and AI as a research method. We delve deeply into the first area, but do not cover the potential of AI to be used as a new method in entrepreneurship research. We refer the readers to Lévesque *et al.* (2022), who investigate this topic (see also Schwab and Zhang, 2019; Lamine *et al.*, 2023). Implications of AI for entrepreneurship education are also outside the scope of this survey. Obschonka and Audretsch (2020) identify this as an important research area, and Winkler *et al.* (2023) offer significant inroads. Finally, we do not include AI in entrepreneurial finance in this review; Ferrati and Muffatto (2021) provide an extensive survey of emerging machine learning approaches in entrepreneurial finance (see also Bertoni *et al.*, 2022).

This review is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews existing and the most widely used definitions of AI and provides an overview of various types of AI technologies and their applications. Section 3 reviews the literature on the AI-entrepreneurship nexus that deals with the concepts of entrepreneurial uncertainty, opportunity, decision-making, and performance. Section 4 presents initial empirical evidence on AI adoption and usage by entrepreneurial businesses and complements it with our own novel analysis of survey data from the German Socio-economic Panel. Section 5 reviews evidence on the indirect effects of AI on entrepreneurship through local labor markets. Section 6 discusses impacts of AI on entrepreneurship ecosystems. Section 7 presents the current regulations of AI, with a focus on the EU, and discusses their potential impacts on the entrepreneurship landscape. Section 8 highlights insights from our review and discusses implications for entrepreneurship research and policy. Finally, Section 9 concludes the survey.

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