Is It LEGIT? Redefining Equity, Leadership, and Influence in Online Business

Sutton C. McCraney, MA, MBA, and Lace Flowers

The Flavor Room

October 14, 2025

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to The Flavor Room.

Email: hello@theflavor.biz

Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of leadership, culture, race, class, gender, sales, and marketing in the online entrepreneurship space while focusing on the need for more ethical and individualized approaches over corporatized standards. This paper is both an unveiling and a challenge to the online entrepreneurial space to create a standard that dissolves societal divisions and stereotypes instead of amplifying them. Drawing on empirical studies and statistics, it highlights systemic illusions of diversity, ethical lapses in digital practices, and the overlooked" hidden systems" like wellbeing and family structures that are the foundation of sustainable business ventures. Predictions for 2026 and beyond shows increasing trends in AI, and personalized experiences.[1] Personal stories from entrepreneurs of color and other diverse backgrounds provide insights that balance research with lived experiences.

---

[1] **Methodology note:**
This paper incorporates qualitative insights drawn from semi-structured interviews conducted between September, 2025 and October, 2025 with entrepreneurs, consultants, and leaders operating across the online business ecosystem. Interviews were conversational in format and focused on participants' lived experiences of leadership, ethics, equity, and influence. Narrative excerpts have been edited for clarity and length only; all quoted material is verbatim. Participants consented to be named and quoted.

Is It LEGIT? Redefining Equity, Leadership, and Influence in Online Business

Introduction

The online business industry has expanded rapidly over the last decade, positioning itself as a force for wealth creation, leadership, and influence. Digital platforms, social media, and remote work environments have lowered barriers to entry. This has allowed entrepreneurs to build visibility and income outside traditional institutions. In theory, this expansion should have widened access and redistributed opportunities (and wealth).[2] However, in practice it has often replicated and in some cases intensified the same inequities it claims to disrupt.

As the industry has matured, a widening gap has emerged between what is publicly claimed and what is privately experienced by entrepreneurs. Diversity, inclusion, and empowerment are reduced to mere buzzwords frequently invoked as values. Yet access to capital, ethical sales practices, decision-making power, and sustained visibility remain unevenly distributed. Leadership is increasingly conflated with branding and social media reach, while standards, accountability, and long-term impact receive far less scrutiny. Influence circulates quickly, but real business legitimacy is rarely interrogated.

This paper asks a direct and necessary question:
Is the online business industry legitimate in how it defines equity, leadership, and influence or has legitimacy become a performance rather than a practice?

To examine this question, this paper draws on existing quantitative research and industry analysis alongside original qualitative research conducted through recorded interviews with entrepreneurs

---

[2] Martin Trust Center. (n.d.). *We See Ourselves as Entrepreneurs, But Others See Our Gender or Race*. Retrieved from Martin Trust Center For MIT Entrepreneurship: https://entrepreneurship.mit.edu/we-see-ourselves-as-entrepreneurs-but-others-see-our-gender-or-race

operating across online business, sales, marketing, and leadership. Quantitative findings from prior studies provide context on disparities in access, representation, and outcomes, while qualitative narratives illuminate how these conditions are lived, navigated, and sustained within the industry. The participant narratives included throughout this paper were constructed directly from verbatim interview transcripts, with full consent for attribution. Rather than anonymizing or abstracting these accounts, the narratives are intentionally written in the participant's voice to preserve meaning, context, and lived reality. These accounts are not presented as testimonials or illustrative anecdotes; they function as qualitative evidence, revealing how industry norms around ethics, inclusion, power, and opportunity are experienced in practice.

The Illusion of Diversity & Inclusion

The online business space is frequently presented as detached from broader social realities, as though participation alone insulates entrepreneurs of color from the structural barriers they face elsewhere. Visibility, accessibility, and representation are often cited as evidence that digital entrepreneurship has "leveled the playing field." Yet this framing confuses presence with power, and participation with protection. This confusion produces what can best be described as an illusion of inclusion; an environment that appears diverse while leaving underlying structures intact. Entrepreneurs of color may be visible, featured, and celebrated, yet still encounter unequal access to capital, networks, legal protection, and recovery pathways. Inclusion becomes something that is seen, rather than something that is materially experienced.

Research on online entrepreneurship supports this distinction. While digital platforms may lower barriers to entry, they do not eliminate disparities in sustainability or outcomes. Black and female entrepreneurs in e-commerce, for example, continue to face systemic gaps in financing, mentorship, and institutional support, even within spaces widely described as more inclusive than traditional markets.[3]

---

[3] RAND Corporation. (2024). *Improving pathways to entrepreneurship: Experiences of Black and female small-business owners in the e-commerce space.*

Representation alone does not resolve these conditions; in some cases, it obscures them. The illusion persists in part because inclusion is often defined by optics rather than conditions. Diversity is measured by who is present, not by who is protected. Equity is inferred from participation, not from durability. When entrepreneurs of color struggle, stall, or exit, those outcomes are frequently attributed to individual shortcomings such as mindset, strategy, and execution rather than examined as indicators of structural strain. This misattribution is reinforced by meritocratic narratives that dominate online business culture. Success is framed as universally accessible to those who are disciplined, visible, and resilient enough. Structural constraints are minimized, particularly when a small number of highly visible success stories are elevated as proof that the system works. These narratives shift responsibility onto individuals while leaving systems unexamined.

Research into racial gaps in entrepreneurship shows that disparities are not driven primarily by ambition or effort, but by unequal starting conditions and ongoing structural barriers. Differences in wealth, social capital, exposure to entrepreneurial norms, and access to institutional knowledge materially shape who can launch, sustain, and scale a business.[4] When these factors are ignored, inclusion becomes rhetorical rather than real. In online business environments, this often manifests as performative diversity. Entrepreneurs of color are invited into visibility without being granted influence, welcomed into community without being afforded safety, and encouraged to participate in systems that lack meaningful accountability when harm occurs. The consequences of this illusion are not abstract. When inclusion is framed as presence rather than protection, power imbalances go unaddressed. Feedback becomes unsafe. Those who raise concerns risk being labeled misaligned or difficult, while those who exit are quietly reclassified as unsuccessful rather than recognized as responding rationally to environments that failed to support them.

---

[4]Duke Fuqua Insights. (2024). *The driver of racial gaps in entrepreneurship.*

Diagnosing the illusion of inclusion is not an argument against diversity efforts. Inclusion cannot be inferred from representation alone. It must be evaluated by examining who absorbs risk, holds decision-making power, is protected when systems fail, and is able to recover without disproportionate cost.[5] Without this distinction, diversity remains symbolic, equity remains aspirational, and legitimacy remains unevenly distributed.

Participant Narrative: *Alexandra Mary Imogine Pradier-Billings, Entrepreneur & Consultant*

I've learned that exclusion sometimes shows up as polite disbelief. As confusion that you exist at all. My experiences of marginalization aren't about race, but they are deeply about class and gender, and how ambition becomes a liability when it doesn't come wrapped in the "right" background. I grew up working class. I'm highly intelligent. I'm ambitious. And for a long time, people simply could not reconcile those facts.

In traditional workplaces, I was repeatedly treated as an anomaly. I remember being openly questioned for studying for a master's degree while working a routine clerical job. Colleagues assumed marriage meant my ambition should end. One manager attempted to block my promotion on the grounds that I was "too ambitious for the role." That phrase was written down. Documented. It took his boss intervening to point out that ambition is not a valid reason to deny someone advancement.

That same disbelief followed me into entrepreneurship. Online business spaces love the language of inclusion, but what they reward is pre-existing privilege and confidence that comes from safety nets, networks, and financial cushioning that go unnamed. When people talk about "anyone can succeed if they just follow the formula," they erase the invisible advantages that make those formulas viable in the first place. What frustrates me most is how success is framed. Many of the loudest success stories fail to disclose the advantages that made their growth possible: family money, elite education, existing platforms, or proximity to power. Without that context, inclusion becomes an illusion that invites people in without telling them the rules were written for someone else.

True inclusion would require acknowledging class openly, not as a mindset problem. It would mean amplifying ingenuity and leadership from people who have had to build from nothing, rather than repeatedly circulating the same voices under the banner of diversity.

---

[5] Omnikal. (n.d.). *The illusion of inclusion.*

The next section examines how these dynamics are not experienced uniformly, but are shaped by the intersecting forces of race, class, and gender further determining who is exposed to risk, who is granted legitimacy, and who is expected to absorb the cost of participation in the online business industry.

Race, Class & Gender in the Online Business Industry

The illusion of inclusion in online business becomes clearer when we examine how race, class, and gender shape access, legitimacy, and endurance within the industry. These identities do not sit outside the structural conditions described previously; they *configure* how those conditions are experienced, interpreted, and enforced.

Entrepreneurship is frequently framed as a universal opportunity: if you have an idea, a platform, and enough effort, you can succeed. But this narrative erases how social identity influences starting conditions and ongoing access to resources. Race and gender are not just demographic categories; they structure economic opportunity, social networks, and institutional support in ways that don't disappear simply because entrepreneurship happens online. Black entrepreneurs, for example, continue to face disparities that undermine both access and outcomes. Studies show that Black business owners are less likely to receive funding, more likely to report difficulty accessing networks and mentorship, and more often positioned in low-growth sectors compared with their white counterparts.[6] These gaps are not explained away by talent or effort. They align with broader patterns of racialized economic exclusion that follow entrepreneurs online, rather than leaving them behind.

Gender presents a parallel dynamic. Women may enroll in entrepreneurial ecosystems at rates like men, but their participation is frequently met with different expectations, evaluations, and constraints.

---

[6] Diversity.com. *Challenges and opportunities for Black entrepreneurs.* https://diversity.com/post/black-entrepreneurs-challenges-opportunities

Research finds that even when women identify as entrepreneurs with clarity and commitment - external observers (including investors, peers, and gatekeepers) are more likely to perceive their gender first and their business potential second.[7] This disjunction produces unequal access to capital, slower growth trajectories, and an elevated cost of proving competence.

Class further intersects with race and gender to produce layered disparities. Economic precarity limits access to risk buffers, whether savings, informal capital, or social networks that underpin sustained entrepreneurial participation. Those without such buffers must prioritize early monetization and short-term viability, which often runs counter to long-term strategic growth and experimentation. These structural conditions are not incidental. They reflect broader patterns of wealth inequality and constrained mobility. Academic research on the so-called "illusion of gender equality" in entrepreneurship underscores how participation statistics can mask deeper imbalances. Even where gender parity in business creation appears to exist, the quality of opportunity, the cost of participation, and the institutional responses to failure remain uneven. Women entrepreneurs disproportionately encounter skepticism, higher expectations for proof, and constraints on progression which results in costs that are both material and psychological. [8]

When race, class, and gender intersect, the cumulative effect is not simply additive but compounding. Entrepreneurs at the nexus of multiple marginalized identities face what sociologists call *structural intersectionality*: systems of exclusion that cannot be reduced to separate categories but must be understood as interlocking and mutually reinforcing. This means that inclusion efforts that treat identity categories in isolation (or that celebrate representation without addressing systemic conditions), will continue to fall short. In the online business industry, this dynamic shows up in who gets funded,

---

[7] MIT Entrepreneurship & Inequality Research. *We see ourselves as entrepreneurs — but others see our gender or race.* https://entrepreneurship.mit.edu/we-see-ourselves-as-entrepreneurs-but-others-see-our-gender-or-race/
[8] Meliou & Ozbilgin, *Explaining the enduring illusion of gender equality in entrepreneurship: Who plays the game and at what cost?* Journal of Management Studies (2023). https://managementstudiesinsights.com/explaining-the-enduring-illusion-of-gender-equality-in-entrepreneurship-who-plays-the-game-and-at-what-cost/

who is believed, protected when harmed, and inherits the benefit of doubt when systems fail. It also

affects pricing, audience expectations, risk exposure, and the interpretation of struggle and exit.

Participant Narrative: Quaceé Dorby, CEO & Lead Vocal Confidence Coach

I learned early what it meant to carry the weight of representation. Growing up in Utah, I was usually the only Black person, sometimes the only Black man in the room. That does something to you. You're visible but not necessarily seen. Included, but only on certain terms.

One moment that still stands out happened in college. In an opera class, the instructor had students come to the front to sing assigned pieces with a pianist. When it was my turn, he didn't invite me up. Instead, he handed me a rap song and told me to perform it "in my style." I wasn't asked to sing. I wasn't given the same platform. When I finished, the class moved on. That was it.

It was awkward, but it clarified something for me: I would have to demand my place, not wait to be offered one. And I did. I went on to earn lead roles in two operas and became one of the highest-paid students on scholarship. That pattern followed me into business.

In online entrepreneurship, I've seen how race, class, and gender quietly shape who is trusted, who is elevated, and who is dismissed. As a Black coach, I noticed I wasn't taken as seriously, especially when I moved from performing into coaching. People respected my talent but questioned my authority. Meanwhile, others with fewer results were treated as experts simply because they fit the expected image.

The unspoken rule is that marginalized founders must be exceptional just to be considered competent. We're expected to outperform, overprepare, and outproduce just to achieve some form of access. That pressure forces creativity, but it also requires more labor for the same recognition.

What's missing from most diversity conversations is honesty. Success stories rarely acknowledge how much harder some people must work to reach the same milestones. Or how many are filtered out before they never get the chance.

The dynamics of race, class, and gender do not stop at entry into online business. They shape how

value is marketed, trust is leveraged, and consent is treated in the pursuit of growth. Ethics in sales and

marketing cannot be evaluated in isolation from the structural conditions that determine who bears risk

and who benefits from urgency.

Ethics in Sales & Marketing

In the online business industry, discussions of ethics in sales and marketing are frequently framed as questions of tone, personality, or individual integrity. Too often the emphasis falls on how something was sold; words, funnel, or urgency rather than on why these tactics are pervasive and what underlying systems allow them to operate without consequence. A diagnostic view reveals that ethical harm in this arena is not the product of isolated bad actors, but the downstream expression of power asymmetry, risk distribution, and market incentives that reward persuasion. Online marketing literature celebrates transparency and trust as aspirational goals. Yet, in practice, many top-tier strategies leverage urgency, scarcity, and psychological triggers to overcome discernment and drive conversion. These tactics may be framed as sophisticated positioning or buyer empowerment, but the effect is the same: pressure substitutes for consent, clarity, and profitability becomes the measure of legitimacy. The surface promise of choice obscures a deeper pattern of influence that prioritizes closing the sale over respecting personal agency.

Participant Narrative: Chloelle Bond, Founder

I learned sales ethics from being on the receiving end of nonsense and being trained in real sales where your job is to respect the human on the other side of the conversation.

One of the most unethical things I see in the online business space is the fear-based, bullying style of marketing. The kind that tells people if they don't buy this program or follow this framework, they're going to fail. It's manipulative and preys on people who are already uncertain, under pressure, and trying to make something work – it's everywhere.

What makes it worse is that most of the people using those tactics don't have the experience to back up what they're selling. I came into entrepreneurship with a real sales background. I've cold-called. I've done outbound. I know what it means to earn attention instead of demanding it. And when I see people online talking about how sales "doesn't work" or how cold outreach is unethical, I know immediately they've never done it. They've never had to hold someone's attention honestly in the first fifteen seconds.

Instead, they hide behind branding, aesthetics, and inflated promises. They act like there's only one way to succeed (their way), when the truth is there are many paths, and no single framework works for everyone. I track my results. My success rate is high, but it's not 100%. That matters. People deserve to know that.

The ethical alternative is honesty. Say why you're reaching out. Say what you offer. Do your research. Respect people's time. Let them choose. Most business owners will respect you for that, even if they say no. What's dangerous is when marketing becomes about control instead of service,

teaches people to outsource their discernment, and convinces them that failure means they are broken.

This dynamic is not accidental. Digital marketing ecosystems are structured around metrics that value attention, clicks, and conversions. When platforms reward engagement, and when revenue is tied directly to responsiveness, ethical boundaries become negotiable. Pressure-based tactics, fear triggers, and overstated outcomes emerge not because individuals are inherently unscrupulous, but the systems they operate within systematically elevate results over relationship. Ethical sales, in contrast, would demand that participants retain agency, not surrender it.

Structural critiques from marketing ethics highlight the limitations of framing ethical responsibility as solely the marketer's burden. The most commonly cited ethical frameworks emphasize transparency, truthfulness, and respect for the audience as ends in themselves.[9] Yet in the online business environment, transparency is selectively applied: disclosures appear where they are required, not where they matter; truth is framed in half-statements rather than full context; and respect for agency is sacrificed in favor of optimized messaging.

Participant Narrative: Sabrina Wright, Ads Strategist

I didn't realize how common idea extraction was until it kept happening to me. At first, it looked like collaboration. Invitations to "pick my brain." I was asked to share insights, frameworks, ways of thinking about brand and messaging. The language was friendly, affirming, relational. I assumed there was mutual respect.

What I noticed over time was that my ideas would resurface elsewhere; repackaged and monetized without credit, acknowledgment, or compensation. The people doing this had larger platforms, more visibility, and proximity to money. Since they were positioned as leaders, their version became the authoritative one. That's when I started to understand how ethics fail in this industry.

There's a narrative that exploitation only happens through aggressive sales tactics or false promises. But a lot of harm happens through appropriation and being visible enough to be mined, but not powerful enough to be protected.

---

[9] "Ethical Sales Strategies in the Digital Era: Building Trust and Transparency," Innerview, accessed [date], https://innerview.co/blog/ethical-sales-strategies-in-the-digital-era-building-trust-and-transparency

What made it harder was how normalized this behavior is. When I tried to call it out, I was subtly reframed as sensitive, territorial, or "not collaborative enough." The expectation was that I should be grateful for the exposure even when my intellectual labor was generating revenue for someone else. This dynamic disproportionately affects marginalized people. Our insights are welcomed when they're useful, but our authorship is negotiable. Ethics become optional when there are no consequences for extraction. I eventually stopped offering free access to my thinking

A deeper systemic problem emerges when we recognize that ethical failures are rarely corrected by market signal alone. Audiences may disengage, but financial incentives still reward tactics that maximize short-term commitment. When persuasion becomes indistinguishable from coercion, especially in contexts where urgency and scarcity are manufactured, the burden of discernment shifts from the seller to the buyer. This inversion not only reproduces harm but normalizes the idea that pressure is part of business.

The consequences of these structural conditions extend beyond sales funnels. They shape who gets access to opportunity, who is positioned as a credible authority, and whose labor is commodified as emotion work and conversion expertise rather than real value. When ethical scrutiny is treated as optional, and profitability is the dominant metric of success, the industry codifies harm as its operating norm. Diagnosing sales and marketing ethics in this light reveals that individual responsibility without structural accountability creates a system in which harm is tolerated, justified, and perpetuated. Only by examining the incentives, power differentials, and unspoken rules that shape online business communication can we begin to understand why ethical breaches persist, who bears the cost, and how legitimacy might be redefined away from coercion and toward respect. Ethics in sales and marketing ultimately reflect the standards set by leadership. When coercive practices become normalized, it is not a failure of tactics but a failure of leadership. The next section examines how leadership as identity, influence, and responsibility shapes the ethical boundaries of the online business industry.

Leadership

Across the online business industry, leadership is understood in terms of visibility, "personal brand," and conversion performance. What is rarely articulated, (and even less frequently examined), is what kind of leadership shapes ethical standards, distributes access to power, and sustains legitimacy over time. Within systems that reward short-term metrics and strategic agility, leadership that performs authority can be mistaken for leadership that upholds shared values. The difference matters deeply for legitimacy.

Leadership in this context is not just about more than visibility or vocal influence. It is about how power is exercised when the lights are off, who gets to shape norms, and whose interests are centered in structures that determine access, safety, and consequence. Ethical failures in sales or in inclusion are rarely accidents of leadership absence; but symptoms of leadership that is unanchored by accountability and structural responsibility. Empirical research into entrepreneurial leadership suggests that leader identity, how leaders perceive themselves and how they enact agency within a business ecosystem, has material implications for organizational growth and resilience. When leaders internalize and embody a sense of responsibility for stakeholders beyond transactional outcomes, they are more likely to steward ecosystems rather than exploit them. This is especially critical in environments where structural constraints (race, class, gender, wellbeing access, financial buffers) shape who can endure and who can lead. Yet even research that foregrounds leadership identity finds that passion or self-definition alone does not guarantee growth or ethical anchoring; the link between passion and positive systemic impact is neither automatic nor universally distributed.[10] This underscores a broader truth: leadership must be cultivated with attention to structural conditions, not merely asserted as personal aspiration.

---

[10] Purushottam Dhakal et al., *When Entrepreneurial Leadership Identity and Passion Meet Venture Growth Intention, Sustainability* 14, no. 20 (2022): 13129; https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/14/20/13129

Within the online business industry, dominant leadership narratives remain focused on individualism: grit, hustle, defiance of adversity. These frames obscure the fact that many leaders rise not because structures favored them but how they learned to navigate those structures. When leadership language centers personal agency without identifying the infrastructure that enables or constrains it, it reproduces the same structural silence that makes hidden systems invisible. A deeper model of leadership for legitimacy situates power in relational responsibility emphasizing the capacity to influence without coercion, to protect without surrendering standards, and to balance ambition with ethical accountability. Leaders who do this shape the conditions under which others can participate without compromise. They ask: who benefits when a strategy succeeds? Who is exposed when it fails? Who bears the cost of risk?

This realignment from individual accomplishment to collective responsibility positions leadership as an ongoing practice of stewardship. Steering an organization ethically in an industry marked by inequity demands more than personal passion. It requires structural literacy: an understanding of how race, class, gender, access, and risk are embedded in norms, incentives, and definitions of success. Understanding leadership this way instead of a persona, is vital if the industry's claims to legitimacy, inclusion, and ethics are to mean more than optics. Leadership must rise to the level of institutional influence, not just personal influence.

Participant Narrative: Gregory Fearon, Coach

I learned early on that leadership isn't about authority. One of the moments that shaped how I lead happened years ago in a corporate setting. I was managing someone who showed up late every single day. On paper, it was a discipline issue. The standard response was to warn them, write them up, move them out. That's what leadership looked like in most environments. But something didn't sit right with me. Instead of escalating, I stopped and asked what was going on.

As I listened, I realized their behavior had nothing to do with laziness or lack of commitment. They were dealing with family illness and caregiving responsibilities they didn't feel safe enough to name. That moment changed how I understood leadership entirely.

What I see now, especially in online business spaces, is how often leaders skip that step. Decisions are made without curiosity. Power is exercised without context. When people don't comply, they're labeled resistant, unmotivated, or "not a fit," rather than being met with inquiry.That approach creates environments where people perform instead of telling the truth.

As a male coach who works primarily with women, I'm especially aware of how power dynamics show up in subtle ways. Leadership isn't just about what you say, it's about what people feel safe enough to bring into the room. If someone can't talk honestly about their body, their health, or their lived reality, then the space isn't safe, no matter how inclusive it claims to be.

I've also experienced what it's like to be invited into leadership spaces without real influence. You're welcomed for optics or expertise but excluded from decision-making. Inclusion becomes symbolic rather than substantive.

That's why I believe leadership has very little to do with control. It has everything to do with responsibility. Responsibility to listen before acting. Responsibility to create environments where people don't have to hide parts of themselves to belong.

Leadership is constrained by infrastructure. What appears as resilience, decisiveness, or strategic clarity is the downstream effect of hidden systems that absorb risk and enable endurance. The next section examines these systems and how their uneven distribution shapes legitimacy in online business.

The Hidden Systems

Discussions of success in online business are rarely framed around the hidden systems that make sustained participation possible in the first place. These systems are not evenly distributed, usually ignored, and often mischaracterized as personal advantages rather than structural conditions. Yet they play a decisive role in determining who can remain visible, recover from disruption, and is ultimately perceived as legitimate.

Hidden systems function as infrastructure. When these systems are present, consistency appears effortless. When they are absent or unstable, even highly capable leaders are forced to operate at a chronic disadvantage. Across interviews and systems-level analysis, several domains repeatedly emerged as foundational: family and care structures, food access and nutritional stability, wellbeing infrastructure, financial and operational systems, and proximity to institutional knowledge. These domains interact, compound, and reinforce one another, shaping not only outcomes, but endurance. Entrepreneurial culture frequently celebrates flexibility while ignoring responsibility. Care labor including childcare, elder care,

and emotional labor remains disproportionately carried by women and marginalized founders. This labor

is rarely recognized as a business variable, yet it directly affects availability, recovery time, and strategic

capacity. Founders with stable care infrastructure can engage in long-range planning, withstand periods of

lower visibility, and absorb risk without immediate consequence. Those without such infrastructure are

often pushed into short-term decision-making, optimizing for immediacy rather than sustainability.[11] The

resulting outcomes are misread as differences in ambition or discipline, when they are in fact differences

in time sovereignty.

Food security is typically framed as a personal lifestyle issue rather than a performance

determinant.[12] However, research consistently links nutritional instability to impaired cognition, reduced

emotional regulation, and diminished decision-making capacity. In entrepreneurial environments that

reward speed, clarity, and emotional presence, these effects accumulate rapidly. Income volatility, a

common feature of early-stage and marginalized entrepreneurship, exacerbates this instability. When

access to adequate food is uncertain due to fluctuating income, time scarcity, or geographic constraint, the

impact shows up not as failure, as fatigue, inconsistency, and burnout. These symptoms are then

moralized as mindset issues, obscuring the structural reality underneath. Wellbeing in online business is

individualized and moralized, positioned as something founders should "prioritize" regardless of

circumstances. In practice, wellbeing operates as infrastructure: access to healthcare, rest, psychological

safety, and recovery time directly influences risk tolerance, ethical decision-making, and longevity.

Founders operating without these supports are more likely to accept misaligned opportunities, tolerate

exploitative arrangements, or overextend themselves simply to remain viable. Over time, this leads not

---

[11] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2021). *Balancing paid work, unpaid work and leisure.* https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-economic-outlook/volume-2021/issue-1_edfbca02-en.html

[12] Mani, A., Mullainathan, S., Shafir, E., & Zhao, J. (2013). *Poverty impedes cognitive function. Science*, 341(6149), 976–980. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.123804

only to burnout, but erosion of trust in the industry, in leadership, and in oneself.[13] Exit, in these cases, is not failure; it is often a rational response to unsustainable conditions.

Financial buffers such as savings, partner income, inherited wealth, or access to credit dramatically alter how risk is experienced. Entrepreneurs with financial cushioning can experiment, pivot, or pause without existential threat. Those without are required to monetize quickly, often at the expense of alignment or ethics. This disparity shapes who can afford to say no, can weather reputational or algorithmic shifts, and who is positioned as "strategic" rather than desperate.[14] Over time, financial cushioning becomes indistinguishable from perceived competence, reinforcing narratives of merit that ignore underlying conditions. Financial cushioning becomes indistinguishable from competence over time, reinforcing narratives of merit that ignore underlying conditions.

Participant Narrative: Jay Asooli, Burnout Recovery Specialist & Relationship Coach

The moment that changed everything for me was an experience of racial financial abuse. It happened inside a professional relationship I was supposed to be safe in. Contracts were vague. Expectations were slippery. Power dynamics were ignored until they mattered and by then, the damage was already done. What I walked away with wasn't just financial loss. It was a deep understanding of how exposed many entrepreneurs are when systems fail them. That experience forced me to become far more stringent about boundaries, contracts, and intellectual property. Not because I wanted to be rigid, but I learned the hard way that good intentions don't protect you.

What's rarely acknowledged in online business is how much invisible labor is required just to stay upright. For marginalized entrepreneurs especially, success isn't just about strategy or mindset. It's about navigating exhaustion, care responsibilities, health, immigration realities, and constant emotional regulation all while being told that burnout is a personal failure rather than a systemic outcome. The industry loves to talk about resilience and grit, but those narratives erase the structural realities people are operating within. When leaders dismiss these conditions, they perpetuate the problem. When feedback is offered, it's often unsafe to give honestly. Psychological safety is promised rhetorically but rarely practiced.

Real belonging, I've learned, requires more than shared values or identity language. It requires the ability to speak truth without fear of retaliation, and leaders who can receive discomfort without punishing the person who call it out.

---

[13] World Health Organization. (2019). *Burn-out an occupational phenomenon.*
https://www.who.int/standards/classifications/frequently-asked-questions/burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon

[14] Haushofer, J., & Fehr, E. (2014). *On the psychology of poverty. Science*, 344(6186), 862–867.
https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1232491

Behind visible success sits an operational backbone: administrative capacity, legal and financial literacy, systems for compliance, and familiarity with institutional norms. When these supports are absent, founders absorb the labor themselves, reducing capacity for leadership and strategic work. Access to institutional knowledge such as how to structure agreements, protect intellectual property, navigate regulation, or negotiate power is unevenly distributed. Those without it are more vulnerable to exploitation and more likely to be labeled inefficient or unprofessional, despite operating under greater complexity. These hidden systems don't determine talent or vision. They determine who can endure. In environments that reward consistency, presence, and scale, endurance becomes a proxy for legitimacy. Those who exit are framed as unsuccessful, when they are quite often responding to structural conditions that remain ignored.

The hidden systems shaping participation, leadership, and legitimacy in online business evolve alongside markets, technology, and cultural expectations. As entrepreneurship enters its next phase, the question is no longer whether the industry will change, but who those changes will serve and under what conditions legitimacy will be earned moving forward**.** The following section examines how emerging trends are likely to reshape entrepreneurship in 2026 and beyond, and why future legitimacy will depend less on visibility and velocity, but more on structural integrity, ethical restraint, and long-term trust.

The Future of Entrepreneurship: 2026 and Beyond

As entrepreneurship moves toward 2026 and beyond, the industry is entering a period of recalibration. Growth is no longer driven solely by speed, scale, or personal brand visibility. Instead, emerging trends point toward a future where credibility, sustainability, and trust become differentiators because instability has made shallow systems harder to maintain. Forecasts on entrepreneurial growth trends highlight shifts toward automation, AI integration, decentralized work, and audience-driven

ecosystems.[15] While these trends are framed as opportunities for efficiency and expansion, they also

introduce new fault lines. Technology may lower barriers to entry, but it doesn't eliminate disparities in

access, discernment, or protection. One of the defining features of the next era of entrepreneurship will be

compression: faster cycles of creation, promotion, monetization, and decline. As tools become more

powerful and accessible, differentiation through tactics alone will erode. What will remain visible are not

just outcomes, but patterns of behavior - how leaders respond under pressure, how transparently value is

communicated, and how systems perform when stressed.

Trust, already fragile in online markets, will become a central currency. Audiences are

increasingly literate in marketing tactics and less tolerant of coercion, inflated promises, and performative

authority. In this environment, legitimacy will not be established through reach or revenue alone, but

through consistency, restraint, and the ability to acknowledge limits. Those who continue to rely on

urgency and opacity may still succeed in the short term, but they will face higher attrition, reputational

volatility, and reduced resilience. The future will also expose a growing divide between extractive and

regenerative models of entrepreneurship**.** Extractive models prioritize rapid monetization, individual gain,

and optimization at the expense of wellbeing and trust. Regenerative models, by contrast, emphasize

durability: sustainable revenue, ethical positioning, and systems that protect both leaders and participants.

This shift is not ideological; it is practical. As markets saturate and audiences fragment, endurance

becomes a strategic advantage.

Participant Narrative: Sara Tajamal, Copywriter & Messaging Strategist

I didn't always have the language for what felt wrong, but I could feel it immediately. As a Muslim woman working globally, I became acutely aware of how language, culture, and assumptions shape who is trusted in online business. Certain phrases, tones, and references are treated as "professional," while others are subtly coded as risky, unpolished, or niche. That bias doesn't disappear just because the work is online. What concerned me most was how ethical responsibility was often stripped away in the name of conversion. Messaging was designed to bypass discernment

---

[15] Hall, J. (2025, December 1). *5 Growth Trends Entrepreneurs Should Pay Attention To In 2026.* Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnhall/2025/12/01/5-growth-trends-to-pay-attention-to-in-2026/

rather than invite it. Complexity was flattened into universal promises. And anyone who questioned those tactics was framed as lacking confidence or ambition.

The future of entrepreneurship, in my view, depends on a fundamental shift: from persuasion to clarity. From dominance to responsibility. From extraction to mutual respect. Ethical influence relies on truth. That means acknowledging limitations, naming uncertainty, and respecting the intelligence of the people you're speaking to. It also means understanding that global audiences are not a monolith. What feels motivating in one context can be coercive in another. I believe the next era of leadership will be defined by those willing to slow down and tell the truth even when it costs them reach. Especially when it costs them reach.

Leadership in this next phase will require structural literacy. Entrepreneurs will need to understand not only how to build offers and audiences, but how power, access, and risk are distributed within their ecosystems. Those who can design businesses that withstand volatility will be better positioned to adapt as norms shift and scrutiny increases. The future of entrepreneurship will not be defined by those who grow fastest, but by those who remain legitimate under pressure. As the industry is increasingly shaped by automation, legitimacy will belong to those who can align capability and ethics with infrastructure, ambition, and responsible growth. What emerges beyond 2026 is a demand that innovation be anchored in systems that allow both businesses and people to thrive sustainably.

Systems shape the future of entrepreneurship, but they are revealed through lived experience. The following narratives move from analysis to impact, illustrating how legitimacy, ethics, and hidden infrastructure are navigated in real entrepreneurial lives.

Personal Narratives: Stories from Entrepreneurs

Participant Narrative: Ruth Tsui, Feel Good Program Architect

I didn't walk away from the industry because I realized how far I'd drifted from myself trying to do things the "right" way. For three years, I worked with a coach who told me that if I wasn't selling money promises, my business would never work. I was told that this was the only way to succeed. And for a while, I believed it. I tried to sell that way. And it felt revolting. Utterly disgusting. I remember looking at myself and thinking, *who the hell am I?* I was selling something I didn't believe in, simply because someone more "successful" told me that was the blueprint.

That moment forced me to step back from the entire narrative I had absorbed about what success was supposed to look like. I realized I'd come so far away from my own values, my own inner compass, in pursuit of legitimacy that wasn't mine. What I began to see more clearly was how normalized this misalignment had become. And when people didn't get results, the blame shifted onto them. You didn't work hard enough. You weren't committed enough. It was never about whether the promise itself was realistic. The industry talks endlessly about empowerment, but so much of it a culture I can only describe as superficial toxicity - shiny, performative, and deeply disconnected from the actual work of change.

Participant Narrative: Taiza Pickering, Coach & Consultant

I didn't realize I was in something cult-like until I was already inside it. At first, it looked like belonging. There was a sense of being "chosen" — like if you just leaned in enough, trusted hard enough, surrendered your resistance, everything would work. Questions were framed as fear. Doubt was reframed as lack of faith not in religion, but in the leader, the method, the system. If you succeeded, it was because the system worked. If you struggled, it was because *you* weren't aligned enough. There was no room for structural critique only personal correction. The more I tried to name what felt off, the more I was encouraged to look inward instead of outward.

I watched people override their instincts, their bodies, and their boundaries in the name of growth. Language was spiritualized. Exploitation was reframed as devotion. And money, always money, became the proof of worth, alignment, and obedience. What finally broke the spell was recognizing how familiar it felt. The dynamics mirrored religious environments I had already deconstructed: charismatic authority, unquestionable leadership, moral superiority, and isolation disguised as belonging. The industry didn't invent these tactics, but it repackaged them for profit. Leaving meant losing community, credibility, and access. But staying would have meant losing myself.

Participant Narrative: Tonesha Hyde, Leadership Strategist & Community Builder

I learned that many spaces in the online business industry weren't built for me but built around me. There was language about inclusion, diversity, and representation. I was invited in. Sometimes even celebrated. But underneath that was a constant pressure to manage my tone, emotions, and truth to remain welcome. Belonging was conditional.

I was expected to show up but not disrupt. Contribute, but not challenge. Bring my full self, if that self didn't make anyone uncomfortable. When I spoke about what I was experiencing, it was often framed as personal sensitivity rather than reality. That's when I understood the difference between inclusion and safety. Inclusion gets you a seat. Safety determines whether you can sit there honestly.

I found myself constantly calculating: *How much can I say? How much of myself is too much?* That kind of self-monitoring is exhausting. It fragments you. And over time, it teaches you to disappear in pieces while still showing up physically.

What became clear was that these spaces were functioning exactly as designed. I stopped trying to contort myself to fit. I chose to build and participate in spaces where people don't have to perform palatability to be respected.

Participant Narrative: Leah Sparrow, Leadership & Strategy Consultant

I don't think the online business industry understands who it works for. Most models of success assume unlimited capacity; endless energy, uninterrupted focus, bodies that don't break down, lives without caregiving responsibilities. When you fall outside that narrow band, the cost of participation rises all at once.

My experience has been shaped by age, gender, and health. There were periods when my body simply could not operate at the pace the industry glorifies. Instead of accommodation, I was met with advice about mindset. Instead of support, I was encouraged to optimize, push through, or reframe exhaustion as a growth edge.

What became clear over time was that sustainability isn't built into most business models. Labor is romanticized. Overextension is normalized. Leadership spaces talk about inclusion, but very few are created for longevity. They reward speed, visibility, and constant output without asking who those conditions serve. When people slow down or step back, they disappear because the system doesn't know what to do with limits.

I've had to redefine success on my own terms. That meant letting go of models that required constant performance. It meant designing my work around what was sustainable for my body and life, rather than what looked impressive from the outside. The hardest part was realizing how few leaders were willing to question systems that only work for a select few.

Conclusion

The evidence presented throughout this paper spanning persistent funding disparities, ethical

failures in digital marketing, leadership accountability, and the often-invisible systems required for

endurance points to a single conclusion: online entrepreneurship cannot claim legitimacy while relying on

performative inclusion and extractive growth models. Equity, ethics, and sustainability are not secondary

considerations; they are structural requirements. As entrepreneurship moves toward 2026 and beyond,

advances in AI, automation, and community-driven business models will continue to reshape access and

opportunity. These shifts hold genuine promise for entrepreneurs of color and other historically

marginalized founders, but only if growth is paired with accountability, and innovation is grounded in

ethical restraint. Without intentional design, emerging tools risk reproducing existing disparities under new guises.

The work ahead is not ideological, but practical. Building legitimate entrepreneurial ecosystems requires leaders who understand how power, access, risk, and responsibility circulate and who are willing to be held to standards that extend beyond personal success. In response to the findings outlined in this paper, The Flavor Room is developing the *LEGIT Certification for Impact-Driven Businesses*, a forthcoming certification program for online entrepreneurs committed to ethical sales and marketing practices, inclusive leadership, and systems-aware business design. The certification is intended as a structural intervention, not a symbolic gesture: a way to codify standards, reinforce accountability, in Spring 2026. The next era of entrepreneurship will not be defined by who grows fastest, but by who builds with integrity, clarity, and care for the systems that make participation possible. Legitimacy will belong to those willing to move beyond optics and invest in standards built for longevity.

References

Abraham, L., Master, B. K., Hassler, G. W., & Phllllips, B. (2024, July 31). *Improving Pathways to Entrepreneurship*. Retrieved from RAND: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA3370-2.html

Clarke, K. (n.d.). *Setting the Stage: The Illusion of Inclusion*. Retrieved from Omnikal: https://www.omnikal.com/illusion-inclusion/

Dhakal, P., Wiesner, R., & Maraseni, T. (2022). When Entrepreneurial Leadership Identity and Passion Meet Venture Growth Intention. *Sustainaibility*, 14. Retrieved from https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/14/20/13129

Diversity. (2025, February 23). *Breaking Barriers: Challenges & Opportunities for Black Entrepreneurs*. Retrieved from Diversity: https://diversity.com/post/black-entrepreneurs-challenges-opportunities

Duke Fuqua School of Business. (2024, January 24). *The Driver of Racial Gaps in Entrepreneurship* . Retrieved from Duke Fuqua School of Business: https://www.fuqua.duke.edu/duke-fuqua-insights/driver-racial-gaps-entrepreneurship

Hall, J. (2025, December 1). *5 Growth Trends Entrepreneurs Should Pay Attention To In 2026*. Retrieved from Forbes: https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnhall/2025/12/01/5-growth-trends-to-pay-attention-to-in-2026/

Haushoffer, J., & Fehr, E. (2014). On the psychology of poverty . *Science*, 862-867.

Innerview. (n.d.). *Ethical Sales Strategies for the Digital Age: Trust and Transparency*. Retrieved from Innerview: https://innerview.co/blog/ethical-sales-strategies-in-the-digital-era-building-trust-and-transparency

Mani, A., Mullainathan, S., Shafir, E., & Zhao, J. (2013). Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function . *Science*, 976-980.

Martin Trust Center. (n.d.). *We See Ourselves as Entrepreneurs, But Others See Our Gender or Race*. Retrieved from Martin Trust Center For MIT Entreprenuership: https://entrepreneurship.mit.edu/we-see-ourselves-as-entrepreneurs-but-others-see-our-gender-or-race/

Meliou, E., & Ozbilgin, M. F. (2023). Explaining the enduring illusion of gender equality in entrepreneurship: Who plays the game and at what cost? *Journal of Management Studies*.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development . (2021, May 31). *Balancing paid work, unpaid work and leisure*. Retrieved from OECD: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-economic-outlook/volume-2021/issue-1_edfbca02-en/full-report.html

West, R. (2024, August 9). *The Ethics of Digital Marketing: A Guide to Responsible Practices*. Retrieved from Roger West: https://www.rogerwest.com/miscellaneous-industry/ethics-of-digital-marketing/

World Health Organization. (2019). *Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon"* . Retrieved from WHO: https://www.who.int/standards/classifications/frequently-asked-questions/burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon