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Using social media for opportunity exploration in social enterprises: Sensemaking and signaling perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how social enterprises leverage social media (SM) for opportunity exploration. Using a multiple case study design, we conducted 51 interviews across 15 South Korean social enterprises and applied the Gioia methodology for thematic analysis. Drawing on sensemaking theory, our findings highlight the central role of public SM platforms, particularly Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, X, and YouTube, in enabling both individual and collective sensemaking around social problems and potential solutions. We show that individual sensemaking is supported through scanning of content posted on external actors' SM profiles, while collective sensemaking occurs via sourcing interactions with external actors on SM. Additionally, anchoring signaling theory, we show how social enterprises strategically manage their own SM content to communicate their capabilities and identity, including those of their founders, to an external audience, thereby encouraging their engagement in the collective sensemaking process. Our study contributes to developing an in-depth understanding for social enterprises to utilize SM for opportunity exploration, distinguishing between opportunity identification and evaluation stages, and outlining the associated challenges.

1. Introduction

The 21st century has seen a significant global surge in social media (SM) use, with the post-pandemic era accelerating the shift towards digital engagement. Meta reported that its platforms had 3.43 billion daily active users in the first quarter of 2025, with over one billion stories shared each day (Meta, 2025; Statista, 2025a). Originally designed to connect individuals, SM platforms have evolved into complex ecosystems supporting intricate networks and interactions (Han et al., 2025), facilitating not only interpersonal relationships but also professional and organizational communication. The rapid development and distinct features of SM have brought significant advantages to businesses. These platforms are now widely employed for both internal communication and collaboration, as well as for engaging with external stakeholders (Han et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025) across multiple business functions, including marketing, human resources, innovation, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Bartoloni and Ancillai, 2024; Bhimani et al., 2019; Cheng and Sheu, 2024; Han et al., 2025).

From a marketing perspective, these platforms enable companies to directly interact with their target audience. A comprehensive analysis of

169 academic articles by Bartoloni and Ancillai (2024) suggests that the adoption of SM consistently enhances marketing outcomes, including elevated brand awareness, increased consumer interest in purchases, and better customer acquisition, satisfaction, and retention. In 2024, over 200 million businesses leveraged Instagram to build customer relationships (Business Dasher, 2024). In recruitment, LinkedIn has become a prominent platform, often referred to as a digital résumé for job seekers (Biea et al., 2024). Organizations may also utilize LinkedIn to monitor employee career progression and tenure (Borah et al., 2023b), aiding the development of more effective retention strategies.

In relation to innovation, research shows that companies can leverage SM to express their needs to external audiences and gather input through crowdsourcing (Chen and Althuisen, 2022; Fu et al., 2022). This process is particularly valuable in early product development stages, such as idea generation and concept refinement (Han et al., 2025). Moreover, Cheng and Sheu (2024) find that SM analytics substantially boost firms' knowledge exploration and radical innovation activities. SM also serves as a channel to share a company's CSR commitments with the broader public (Lewin and Warren, 2025). For example, Macca et al. (2024) found that CSR-related Facebook posts by

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15 European banks, especially those highlighting employee support, drew higher user engagement, helping amplify messages and enhance the perceived credibility and authenticity of CSR initiatives.

Beyond commercial firms, social enterprises are also increasingly utilizing SM. Emphasizing the convergence of digital, social, and entrepreneurial processes, scholars have highlighted that digital technologies are crucial for scaling and sustaining social enterprises (He et al., 2022; Soni et al., 2021; Yáñez-Valdés et al., 2023). SM helps foster partnerships with volunteers, NGOs, and institutional actors, especially in remote regions (Bacq and Janssen, 2011) and supports cross-sector collaborations through boundary-spanning connections (Ali et al., 2023). Platforms like Facebook and X have been shown to increase crowdfunding success through wide outreach, storytelling, and emotional engagement (Borst et al., 2018; Laurell et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2024). Additionally, SM allows social enterprises to market their products and campaigns cost-effectively to diverse audiences (Ali et al., 2023). While well-documented, these SM applications in social enterprises mostly concern the opportunity exploitation phase, focusing on resource mobilization and solution delivery. With few exceptions, the application of SM in exploring social opportunities remains overlooked. Ali et al. (2023) briefly touch on how SM can aid in crowdsourcing information to understand social issues and co-develop innovative solutions. Yet, there is little empirical insight into how SM is used during the two stages of opportunity exploration: opportunity identification and evaluation. This represents a critical gap in both social enterprise and SM literature.

Addressing this gap is important for three reasons. First, the number of social enterprises is rapidly increasing across the world, with many focused on tackling grand challenges such as climate change, poverty, and public health issues. In the UK alone, there were 131,000 social enterprises in 2024, employing 2.3 million people and contributing approximately 3.4 % to GDP (Social Enterprise UK, 2025). Therefore, studying SM strategies that support these enterprises holds significant economic and societal relevance. Second, for social enterprises, the ability to generate long-term social value while maintaining financial sustainability critically depends on identifying suitable opportunities (Corner and Ho, 2010; Hietschold et al., 2023). Most public SM platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and X, present cost-effective, accessible channels for social enterprises to engage diverse stakeholders and collaboratively identify problems and solutions (Ali et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020). Third, addressing this research gap has substantial practical implications. For instance, smaller firms in OECD countries are “lagging behind in the transition to digital” (OECD, 2021, p.3) and among other recommendations, OECD has advised creating role models and promoting success stories of digitally transformed small businesses.

To address this research gap, we ask the following research questions:

RQ1: How do social enterprises use content posted by external actors on public social media (SM) platforms to identify and evaluate opportunities?

RQ2: How do social enterprises manage their own content on public SM platforms to identify and evaluate opportunities?

To address these research questions, we used an exploratory research design involving 15 case studies and 51 interviews in South Korea. We chose South Korea because (a) it was the first Asian country to legally define the criteria for social enterprises, which play a crucial role in its economy, and (b) the SM adoption rate in South Korea is 92 % of the population (Statista, 2025b).

This study advances research on digital social entrepreneurship by providing an in-depth understanding of how social enterprises use SM to identify and evaluate opportunities. To our knowledge, this is the first study to address this topic. We find that social enterprises draw on SM content published by others through two key mechanisms: scanning and sourcing. Scanning supports individual sensemaking, while sourcing facilitates collective sensemaking about social problems and potential

solutions, which ultimately contributes to both opportunity identification and evaluation. We also show that social enterprises manage their own SM content to signal the capabilities and identity of both the enterprise and its founders. This further supports opportunity identification and evaluation. These findings extend theoretical understanding of sensemaking, signaling, and identity in the context of social enterprises. Finally, we discuss potential challenges that social enterprises may encounter when using SM for these purposes.

The remainder of this article begins by reviewing the current literature on opportunity exploration in social enterprises and SM. Next, we explain the methods and findings. The article concludes with a discussion of research and practical implications, and future research avenues.

2. Literature review

In the following sub-sections, we begin by reviewing the literature on social enterprises, followed by a discussion of the opportunity exploration process within these organizations. We then engage with the literature on SM, focusing on how it is used to explore opportunities in other contexts, particularly in large commercial firms. This review also helps generate a preliminary set of literature-driven analytical codes, which informs the design of our thematic coding and the interpretation of our empirical data.

2.1. Social enterprises

Social enterprises are a distinct research stream that should not be conflated with charity and philanthropy, sustainability and corporate social responsibility, social innovation, and commercial entrepreneurship (Bonfanti et al., 2024; Saebi et al., 2019). These frequent misinterpretations are caused by definitional problems (Dacin et al., 2011). Social enterprises seek to create a social impact rather than maximize shareholder returns (Bonfanti et al., 2024). Their experience and training may lead to greater social impact (Rey-Martí et al., 2021). Moreover, various social enterprises with the same social cause may form alliances to enhance performance (Cesay et al., 2021). Many collaborate with, rather than compete with, other organizations (Kosmyrin, 2021) to gain resources, develop capabilities, and form cohesive networks (Goduscheit et al., 2021).

Mair and Marti (2006) argue that social entrepreneurship can take place just as effectively on a for-profit basis, exemplifying the business model that Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus developed for the Grameen Bank. Thus, social enterprises are innovative and proactive in creating social value and may operate as non-profit, for-profit, or hybrid models. Furthermore, social enterprises require different standards of evaluation when compared with for-profit ventures. While entrepreneurial orientation is tri-dimensional (Wales et al., 2020), social entrepreneurial orientation includes five dimensions: innovativeness, proactiveness, risk management, effectual orientation, and social mission orientation (Dwivedi and Weerawardena, 2018). The final two dimensions reflect behavioral tendencies to manage limited resources to attain optimal solutions (i.e., effectuation) and address social needs (i.e., social mission) (Fisher, 2012). Gali et al. (2020) adopt this social entrepreneurial orientation construct and find a negative relationship with financial performance. Social entrepreneurship may be perceived as an interactive process that integrates entrepreneurship and social orientation.

Unlike traditional businesses, social enterprises are deeply embedded in their social missions, which dictate strategic and operational decisions. The identification and pursuit of opportunities are not only entrepreneurial acts but also mechanisms for achieving social value (Vickers et al., 2025) and social change (Hietschold et al., 2023). Opportunity exploration serves as a foundational process for social impact, as it involves recognizing unmet societal needs, which is an essential condition for achieving meaningful outcomes (Corner and Ho, 2010). Furthermore, the formulation of context-specific and adaptive solutions

to these identified challenges is pivotal in enhancing the efficacy and sustainability of social interventions (Mair and Marti, 2006; Santos, 2012). Accordingly, while this study focuses on the exploration of social opportunities, it acknowledges the broader implications of such exploration as a pathway for social value creation and delivery.

At the same time, social enterprises are hybrid organizations that balance a social mission and financial sustainability. They operate across a spectrum, ranging from non-profit models that reinvest all surpluses into social causes (e.g., microfinance institutions), to hybrid enterprises that blend financial and social goals (e.g., fair trade companies), to for-profit impact-driven businesses that integrate social objectives with market-based strategies (e.g., impact investment-backed ventures) (Santos, 2012; Spanuth and Urbano, 2024). Different social enterprise models exhibit distinct entrepreneurial pursuits, particularly in terms of opportunity exploration. Non-profit social enterprises often depend on philanthropic partnerships and public-sector collaborations, while hybrid and for-profit models leverage market-driven strategies and private investments (Sahasranamam et al., 2024).

Scholars increasingly highlight the role of digital technologies as essential tools in addressing complex societal challenges (Spanuth and Urbano, 2024; Yáñez-Valdés et al., 2023). Within this context, digital technologies are considered critical resources for social enterprises, enabling novel approaches to value creation and enhancing their competitive positioning (Alshawaaf and Lee, 2021; Torres and Augusto, 2020). These tools also expand the reach and operational capacity of social enterprises. For instance, blockchain technology can be employed to run transparent, scalable crowdfunding campaigns and to overcome financial barriers using cryptocurrencies (Nguyen et al., 2021). Moreover, digital solutions contribute to achieving hybridity by allowing social enterprises to scale both their social impact and financial sustainability (He et al., 2022).

Despite the increasing prominence of digital technologies, the specific role of SM remains underexplored in the literature (Geissinger et al., 2023). A bibliometric analysis by Ali et al. (2023) examines how SM has been used in the context of social enterprises. However, their findings are largely confined to the opportunity exploitation stage, focusing on how SM facilitates collaboration, resource mobilization through crowdfunding, and marketing activities. Although they briefly touch on crowdsourcing, insights into its use during the early stages of opportunity exploration remain limited. Overall, most studies in the domain of digital social entrepreneurship have concentrated on how digital tools, including SM, support processes after opportunities have been identified, rather than how they aid in the discovery or development of those opportunities.

2.2. Opportunity exploration in social enterprises

Entrepreneurial opportunities “are those situations in which new goods, services, raw materials, and organizing methods can be introduced and sold at greater than their costs of production” (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000, p. 220). Studies (e.g., Ardichvili et al., 2003; Perrini et al., 2010) suggest that the opportunity exploration process can be divided into two key stages: (a) the opportunity identification stage, where the enterprise recognizes a social gap or problem and potential solutions to address it, and (b) the opportunity evaluation stage, where the problems and solutions are assessed and the most suitable opportunity is chosen.

2.2.1. Opportunity identification in social enterprises

Opportunity identification has traditionally been framed as the discovery or recognition of opportunities that exist independently in the external environment (Shane, 2000). This framing views opportunities as objective realities, namely, latent gaps or inefficiencies in the market that can be identified by those with the right perceptual and analytical capabilities (Kirzner, 1997; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Wei, 2022). Opportunities are externally driven and exist regardless of an

enterprise's intentions or actions. Firms that are more “alert”, a term Kirzner (1997) uses to describe those with heightened sensitivity to market changes, are thought to be better positioned to recognize such opportunities. This cognitive alertness often stems from prior knowledge, accumulated experience, or unique information-processing abilities that allow entrepreneurs and enterprises to perceive opportunities others might overlook (Kirzner, 1997; González et al., 2017).

In social enterprises, opportunity recognition depends particularly on the ability to interpret complex and evolving environments when addressing socially embedded challenges, many of which stem from institutional voids, policy failures, or systemic inequities (Corner and Ho, 2010). As Ganzin et al. (2020) argue, recognizing these institutionally derived problems requires a nuanced understanding of the surrounding social, cultural, and regulatory contexts. Kimmitt and Muñoz (2018) frame social problems as “a consequence of market failure, whereby market institutions do not optimally provide efficient outcomes for individuals” (p. 863). Thus, effective opportunity recognition hinges on the ability to diagnose institutional shortcomings and reframe them as solvable issues through entrepreneurial action. Moreover, since social problems are often ambiguous, multifaceted, and deeply embedded in local realities, engagement with external stakeholders is vital. Collaborative interpretation fosters shared understanding of needs, constraints, and potential solutions (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012; Wei, 2022). In this way, stakeholder dialogues shape how opportunities are cognitively framed and socially validated.

Opportunity recognition is also influenced by microfoundational factors such as individual cognition, prior knowledge, and social capital. Recent research highlights how these elements interact to form the basis of entrepreneurial judgment and action (Hock-Doepgen et al., 2025; Tang et al., 2025). Entrepreneurs actively engage in information searches, draw from personal experiences, and leverage relationships with peers, mentors, and institutional actors to enhance their understanding of the environment and spot viable opportunities (González et al., 2017). Thus, while opportunities may exist independently, their recognition is a socially and cognitively mediated process.

However, this recognition-oriented view has increasingly been challenged by scholars who argue that opportunities are not merely found, but often created through proactive agency, imagination, and social construction (Alvarez and Barney, 2007; Sarasvathy, 2024). This creation perspective posits that opportunities emerge endogenously, shaped by the goals, resources, and actions of enterprises in conjunction with evolving external contexts. It is particularly relevant in social entrepreneurship that addresses ill-defined, emergent, or previously unacknowledged problems. Using an effectuation lens, Corner and Ho (2010) conceptualize opportunity creation as a non-linear, iterative process that begins not with a predefined end goal, but with a set of available means, for instance, who the enterprise is and what and whom they know. Rather than executing a clear plan, enterprises continuously adapt based on feedback, experimentation, and stakeholder engagement. This process often involves “blind variation” (González et al., 2017), where multiple ideas are tested in practice, with unsuccessful ones discarded and promising ones refined over time. Importantly, opportunity creation is frequently linked to radical innovation, introducing solutions that either do not yet exist or offer significantly better outcomes than current alternatives (González et al., 2017). Enterprises engaged in this process are what Corner and Ho (2010) call “molders”, that is, actors who shape their immediate environments through iterative experimentation and co-creation, rather than merely predicting or reacting to external forces (p. 638).

2.2.2. Opportunity evaluation in social enterprises

Social enterprises, as hybrid organizations that integrate both commercial and social logics, adopt a dual-lens approach to opportunity evaluation, balancing considerations of social impact and economic sustainability (Yitshaki et al., 2022). This hybrid nature introduces additional complexity to the evaluation process, as success is not solely

defined by profitability but also by alignment with social missions and responsiveness to community needs (Corner and Ho, 2010; Kamaludin, 2023). This necessitates evaluating criteria that go beyond conventional cost-benefit analyses. As Smith et al. (2013) argue, managing these competing demands requires a paradoxical mindset that simultaneously pursues divergent logics and potentially conflicting objectives. In evaluating the social value of an opportunity, enterprises should consider the urgency and prevalence of the social issue in question (Zahra et al., 2008). Beyond meeting immediate community or societal needs, attention should also be given to the potential for long-term systemic impact, that is, whether the opportunity can contribute to structural or institutional change over time (Hietschold et al., 2023; Perrini et al., 2010).

Another key dimension of opportunity evaluation is determining the fit between the opportunity and the enterprise's existing capabilities, resources, and core values. However, entrepreneurial cognition research identifies the role of cognitive biases in shaping evaluative decisions, especially when determining the fit (Grégoire et al., 2010). Within social enterprises, entrepreneurs may disproportionately favor opportunities that align with their mission, or they feel emotionally connected to the cause (Yitshaki et al., 2022), even in the face of uncertain financial prospects. Feasibility also plays a critical role, encompassing practical concerns such as the level of innovation required, the availability of internal or external resources, and the need for strategic partnerships to implement the solution effectively (Zahra et al., 2008).

Santos (2012) offers a framework for understanding how social enterprises navigate this exploration stage, highlighting the importance of aligning business models with social missions. This framework recommends blending market-based mechanisms with mission-driven objectives, requiring a nuanced and context-sensitive approach to opportunity evaluation. Iterative development and pilot testing are also key practices for refining opportunities and business models based on real-world feedback (Lichy et al., 2025; Tracey and Jarvis, 2007). Such adaptive approaches enhance both effectiveness and sustainability.

Opportunity evaluation in social enterprises is also inherently collaborative, often involving a wide range of external stakeholders, such as beneficiaries, funders, community members, and institutional actors (Bonfanti et al., 2024). Feedback from these actors can help shape and refine the opportunity to better align with the needs and values of the community (Perrini et al., 2010; Santos, 2012). Below, we review the literature on leveraging SM for opportunity identification and evaluation.

2.3. SM and opportunity exploration

There are numerous definitions of SM. Trainor et al. (2014) define SM as applications, including accessible mobile and web tools, that enable individuals to create, share, and seek content, as well as to communicate and collaborate. Han et al. (2025) categorize SM platforms into four main types: (a) in-house platforms developed by companies to engage directly with customers, such as My Starbucks Idea and Dell's IdeaStorm; (b) enterprise collaboration tools like Yammer and IBM Connections, which are provided by third-party service providers and used internally; (c) public SM platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube, that enable interaction with a broader external audience; and (d) innovation intermediary platforms such as Inno-Centive, which support customized ideation contests both within and outside the organization. In this study, we focus on public SM platforms only. These platforms are often freely accessible, making them particularly attractive to social enterprises that typically operate with limited resources, especially during their early stages. In the following subsections, we examine existing research on the role of SM in opportunity identification and evaluation.

2.3.1. SM and opportunity identification

SM applications in opportunity identification within large

commercial organizations, particularly in facilitating idea generation processes, are well-documented. SM platforms enable firms to monitor user-generated content and online conversations, thereby detecting emerging trends and unmet market needs (Felicetti et al., 2024). These platforms provide real-time insights into customer preferences, product reviews, competitor strategies, and overall market sentiment (Liu et al., 2023). Further, customer feedback collected via SM can highlight areas where existing products require improvement and reveal opportunities for new product development, thereby enhancing market sensing capabilities (Han et al., 2025; Li et al., 2023). Techniques such as hashtag analysis and sentiment monitoring further support firms in capturing cultural shifts and identifying innovation gaps (Kumar et al., 2022). Visual content, such as customer-posted photos, can also yield valuable insights into consumer perceptions and brand sentiments, revealing areas that may need attention (Kaiser et al., 2020).

Beyond passive monitoring, SM platforms facilitate collaborative ideation by allowing users to actively contribute ideas, suggest improvements, and participate in product development (Bhimani et al., 2019). This process, often referred to as "co-creation" (Shi et al., 2022), allows firms to leverage user creativity and contextual knowledge. Many firms launch innovation campaigns or contests on SM or proprietary platforms to crowdsource ideas (Han et al., 2025). For example, Starbucks launched My Starbucks Idea in 2008, a SM-based platform that collected over 150,000 customer suggestions in five years, 277 of which were implemented (Julkowski, 2018).

To ensure idea relevance and quality, it is essential that firms provide clear task instructions and problem definitions during such initiatives (Fu et al., 2022). However, a major challenge in SM-based ideation is information overload (Han et al., 2025; Jabeen et al., 2023). Large volumes of submitted ideas can overwhelm firm resources, making the review of each idea difficult (Fu et al., 2022; Hoornaert et al., 2017). Furthermore, not all contributors may be actual users or customers, raising concerns about the relevance and applicability of the ideas. The lack of tangible incentives may also reduce motivation to participate, especially when only a small fraction of ideas are selected from a large pool (Patel et al., 2023). The high level of competition in such contests may further discourage user participation (Shi et al., 2022).

2.3.2. SM and opportunity evaluation

SM platforms also support opportunity (idea) evaluation. Firms often use in-house SM platforms to allow employees to upload and rate ideas, with colleagues offering comments that help refine and expand upon submitted concepts (Chen and Althuisen, 2022; Hoornaert et al., 2017). Metrics such as likes, shares, and positive engagement can indicate an idea's potential and are frequently used by large multinationals operating across diverse markets (Bashir et al., 2017; Han et al., 2025).

Beyond internal collaboration, firms often engage customers in the evaluation process by forming dedicated online user communities. Klein and Garcia (2015) identify three primary filtering mechanisms that firms use in the idea evaluation process on SM: (1) Author-based filtering, which evaluates the idea contributor's credibility; (2) Content-based filtering, which assesses ideas based on quality, feasibility, and strategic fit; and (3) Crowd-based filtering, which involves users in evaluating and advancing ideas. Firms may ask users to continue the idea evaluation process by voting and ranking by score or preference, and predicting markets — where users invest in ideas they believe will be selected, earning rewards if their predictions prove correct (Klein and Garcia, 2015; Hoornaert et al., 2017). Starbucks, for instance, evaluated customer-submitted ideas on its platform based on practicality, brand alignment, and enthusiasm, as indicated by the number of votes received (Julkowski, 2018). SM also enables firms to communicate the outcome of the evaluation, whether an idea is adopted or rejected (Hoornaert et al., 2017). It also allows provision of transparent feedback to the rejected ideas, building trust and improving the quality and quantity of future submissions (Chen and Althuisen, 2022; Fu et al., 2022). Research has also observed that companies may use such online

user communities to seek detailed feedback on prototypes (Han et al., 2025).

Despite these benefits, challenges persist. Firms must disclose their strategic goals and internal capabilities to help contributors evaluate and screen more relevant ideas, which may result in unwanted knowledge spillover. Without such transparency, users may evaluate ideas based on personal interest rather than the firm's actual selection criteria (Hoornaert et al., 2017). Consequently, as Klein and Garcia (2015, p.39) observe, "crowds are much better at eliminating bad ideas than at identifying good ones".

While the utilization of SM for idea identification and evaluation has been extensively explored within commercial contexts, its application within social enterprises remains under-researched. This gap raises questions about the generalizability of existing findings to social enterprises, which operate under distinct conditions. Social enterprises often address complex and multifaceted social issues, where both the problems and potential solutions may be ill-defined (Kimmitt and Muñoz, 2018). Unlike large commercial organizations that typically begin with clear objectives (Fu et al., 2022), social enterprises may need to employ SM not only for sourcing solutions but also for understanding and framing the problems themselves. Moreover, in terms of stakeholder engagement, while commercial entities primarily focus on customer interactions, social enterprises tend to engage with a broader spectrum of stakeholders, including local communities, beneficiaries, and government organizations (Spanuth and Urbano, 2024). These contextual differences limit the applicability of existing insights on SM use developed in corporate settings and highlight the need for research tailored to the unique dynamics of social enterprises. As Bhimani et al. (2019, p. 261) emphasize in their systematic review of literature on SM in innovation management, there is a pressing need for further research to explore "the relationship of SM and innovation performance at societal level, exploring e-government and community level engagement [towards social change]". Similarly, Geissinger et al. (2023) call for utilizing SM to capture early trend signals and new domains. Felicetti et al. (2024) further suggest developing specific models for the evolving context generated by digital transformation. This paper aims to address these research gaps.

3. Methods

3.1. Methodological framework

This research adopts a qualitative exploratory design, given the limited prior investigation of SM in the opportunity exploration processes of social enterprises. Prior studies (e.g., Borah et al., 2019, 2023a; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Jaskiewicz et al., 2015; Li et al., 2023) have confirmed the suitability of qualitative studies for developing theories and conceptual frameworks, particularly in underexplored fields and entrepreneurship. We adopted a grounded theory-based approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) as it provides a robust foundation for generating grounded and theoretically meaningful insights. To ensure analytical rigor, we followed the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), which offers a structured framework for inductive theory building. Bouncken et al. (2025) further reinforce this approach, advocating the use of grounded theory and the Gioia methodology for investigating emergent and complex phenomena. They highlight its strength in facilitating deeper conceptual insights compared to more deductive approaches. We opted for a multiple case study approach as it is suitable for the "how" research question (Yin, 1984). Further, case studies are particularly suited for researching multidimensional issues, such as using SM in social enterprises (Yin, 1984). This approach necessitates gathering data not only from internal actors like founders, volunteers, and employees, but also external stakeholders such as community members who engage with the social enterprise via SM. This may explain why case studies are the most frequently used research strategy in innovation management literature on the enablers and drivers of SM

(Bhimani et al., 2019).

Given the exploratory nature of this study, we adopted a purposeful sampling strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015) to identify information-rich cases capable of offering deep insights into the phenomenon. Purposeful sampling enables researchers to select participants based on their relevance to the research question rather than through random selection, ensuring that the data collected are both meaningful and theoretically grounded (Palinkas et al., 2015). To guide our sampling process, we adopted Robinson's (2014) four-point framework for purposeful sampling. The first criterion involved defining the sample universe. We restricted our search to social enterprises that actively used SM. This involved two key activities: (1) identifying a pool of over 2000 certified social enterprises from the Korea Social Enterprise Promotion Agency's website, and (2) evaluating the degree of each enterprise's SM engagement. Approximately 30 % (670 enterprises) were found to be highly active on SM. This subset also allowed for heterogeneity in both the focus areas of social enterprises and their geographical distribution across South Korea. The second criterion concerned determining an appropriate sample size. Since this study follows a grounded theory approach, we did not fix a sample size in advance but instead allowed the number of cases to be determined through the process of thematic saturation. Consistent with this approach, Bouncken et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of prioritizing depth and conceptual richness over mere data repetition, thereby reinforcing the sampling and saturation strategy adopted in this research.

For the third criterion, which concerned the sampling strategy, we focused on social enterprises that had integrated SM into their operations from the beginning. Enterprises that adopted SM only at a later stage, primarily for marketing or customer engagement purposes, were excluded from the sample, as these practices reflect opportunity exploitation rather than identification and evaluation. This selection process resulted in 92 enterprises. To meet the fourth criterion, which involved sourcing participants, we contacted these 92 enterprises through their official email addresses and SM. Of these, 37 enterprises responded positively and agreed to take part in the study.

3.2. Data collection

Data collection was carried out between August 2021 and July 2022. We initially interviewed the founders, as they had been involved with the enterprise since its inception. For each case, we employed a snowball sampling strategy (Myers and Newman, 2007), asking each founder to recommend other individuals, either within or outside the social enterprise, who possessed relevant knowledge and could participate in the study. This approach enabled us to reach out to additional employees of the enterprise. In cases where SM activities were primarily managed by volunteers, we tried interviewing at least one of these volunteers. We observed that in most cases, SM engagement involved active conversations with community members around social issues and possible solutions. It was therefore imperative to interview them to capture their perspectives on the enterprise's SM activities and in a few cases, founders facilitated connections with relevant community representatives. The inclusion of these diverse voices enabled us to triangulate the data and better understand the multifaceted nature of SM use in opportunity exploration. A total of 51 interviews were conducted for 15 cases. This number was determined based on thematic saturation, which occurs when additional data no longer yield new insights (Guest et al., 2006). We found that the last nine interviews from last three cases did not yield any new first-order concepts. Table 1 presents a list of interviewees per case.

All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format (Leech, 2002), which ensured a consistent interview framework, while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions and in-depth probing. We collected data in a single wave, using a cross-sectional research design aimed at capturing retrospective insights from participants who had already completed opportunity exploration. This retrospective, cross-sectional

Table 1
Descriptive summary of the cases (social enterprises) interviewed.

Social enterprise	Founding year	Size	Work and mission (core focus and sector)	Financial model and means	No. of participants interviewed
Alpha	2017	8 paid staff + 6 freelance	Organize concerts for street (homeless) artists (community support)	Self-sustainable or government contracts, grants, and trading income	Five (one founder, two staff members, two volunteers)
Beta	2014	15 paid staff + volunteers	Provide community-based art projects and mentoring to help social enterprise succeed and organize community art development program (community support)	Largely philanthropic funding, donations, and government contracts	Four (one founder, one staff member, one volunteer, one community member)
Gamma	2016	5 paid staff + volunteers	Provide shelters to abandoned animals and organize campaigns (animal protection services)	Self-sustainable, philanthropic funding, donations, and government contracts	Three (one founder, one manager, one community member) *
Delta	2017	8 paid staff	Promote inclusion and sustainable design to solve environmental and social issues. Young people with intellectual disabilities are a vital part of the team (solutions for unemployment)	Self-sustainable, trading income	Four (one founder, two staff members, one community member)
Epsilon	2016	18 paid staff + 3 freelance	Promote eco-friendly fashion brand for the improvement of the global environment by producing products using eco-friendly materials (environmental projects)	Self-sustainable, trading income	Five (one founder, two staff members, two community members)
Zeta	2019	4 paid staff + volunteers	Promote empowerment of women by organizing events, campaigns, and training classes for career enhancement following childbirth (women empowerment)	Largely philanthropic funding, donations, and government contracts	Three (one founder, two staff members)
Eta	2016	15 paid staff + volunteers	Convert industrial waste energy streams into heat and power with on-site generation plants (energy and recycling projects)	Self-sustainable, trading income	Three (one founder, two staff members)
Theta	2015	19 paid staff	Run campaigns spreading awareness and taking action to stop sexual violence and abuse by fashion (human rights projects)	Self-sustainable, trading income	Three (one founder, one staff member, one community member) *
Iota	2018	13 paid staff + volunteers	Promote environmental awareness through recycling activities and grant another chance to the marginalized in society, hiring the homeless, ex-convicts, and vulnerable women (community support)	Self-sustainable, trading income	Four (one founder, two staff members, one volunteer)
Kappa	2018	5 paid staff + volunteers	Provide people with the know-how, systems, and tools to help create an organized space at their home (community building and restoration)	Largely philanthropic funding, donations, and government contracts	Three (two founders, one staff member)
Lamda	2020	10 paid staff + volunteers	Provide customized COVID-19 cleaning and disinfection services for businesses and households that want to prevent an outbreak in their workplace (community support)	Self-sustainable, trading income	Three (one founder, two staff members)
Mu	2016	9 paid staff	Run campaigns to raise environmental awareness and sell upcycled garden pots to help tackle inequalities and social exclusion in communities (environmental projects)	Largely philanthropic funding, donations, and government contracts	Two (one founder, one staff member)
Nu	2014	30 paid staff	Provide AI dataset one-stop solution service to collect, annotate, and manage training datasets, seeking diversity in the STEM field (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) with inclusive employment (education)	Self-sustainable, trading income	Two (one founder, one staff member)
Xi	2015	4 paid staff + volunteers	Offer practical, activity-based programs in schools, colleges – providing young people with the opportunity to develop key skills and develop connections between school and work (education)	Self-sustainable, trading income	Four (one founder, two staff members and one volunteer)
Omicron	2017	5 paid staff + volunteers	Provide consulting for artists and organize coaching and mentoring for underprivileged youth (education)	Self-sustainable, trading income	Three (one founder, one volunteer, one community member)

* Focus group interviews.

approach is appropriate for investigating entrepreneurial processes (e.g., [Dhir et al., 2024](#)). Recounting their past experiences, participants were able to offer rich and nuanced reflections that contributed to a deeper contextual and temporal understanding of the phenomenon ([Maxwell, 2013](#); [Patton, 2002](#)).

Due to COVID-19-related restrictions, all interviews were conducted via telephone or Zoom. Each session was audio-recorded, transcribed, and lasted between 34 and 85 min. In two instances, we conducted focus group interviews, facilitating a collective reflection among the participants ([Morgan, 2002](#)). Scheduling constraints prevented us from using this method in other cases.

Regarding secondary data, we collected information on the SM profiles of the enterprises and founders. We obtained consent before collecting data from the SM profiles. Additionally, we received access to

websites and reports published by the enterprises. These secondary data were not used for coding; instead, they helped validate some of the interview findings.

3.3. Data analysis

We followed the Gioia methodology ([Gioia et al., 2013](#)) to analyze our data, a method widely used in qualitative studies in entrepreneurship and related disciplines (e.g., [Borah et al., 2021](#); [Jaskiewicz et al., 2015](#); [Kaehr Serra and Thiel, 2019](#)). This method recommends a three-step analysis of qualitative data. The first step involves identifying first-order concepts from the interview quotes. At this stage, all interviews were imported and processed using NVivo 10. NVivo 10 is specialized software that manages, stores, and analyzes large volumes of

qualitative data (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019), allowing the data to be coded into nodes. The nodes created in NVivo were then axially coded (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) into first-order concepts. This involved combining multiple interview quotes into common concepts based on similarities in meaning. Axial coding contributed to a reduction in the number of nodes to a manageable set.

In the second step, we identified second-order themes by organizing first-order concepts using relevant theoretical lenses. Two theoretical perspectives proved helpful for thematic analysis: (a) sensemaking, defined as “a process of social construction in which individuals [and organizations] attempt to interpret and explain sets of cues from their environment” (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21), and (b) signaling, the process by which one party credibly conveys information about itself to another (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2011). Within sensemaking theory, we focused on two distinct forms: individual sensemaking, where organizations (in this case, social enterprises) interpret their external environment independently (Czakoń and Czernek-Marszałek, 2025), and collective sensemaking, where meaning is constructed jointly with external actors (Kimmitt and Muñoz, 2018; Maitlis, 2005). Next, we emphasized two specific types of signaling: capability signaling, which refers to communicating the competencies of an organization (in this case, social enterprises) and individuals (founders) (Bafra and Kleinert, 2023), and identity signaling, which involves communicating core values, mission and purpose to external stakeholders (Colombo, 2021). Finally, by referencing the two stages of opportunity exploration, opportunity identification and evaluation, we derived aggregated dimensions. To ensure rigor and trustworthiness in the data analysis process, all three authors independently engaged in coding and then met regularly to compare interpretations. Although a formal inter-coder reliability statistic was not calculated, discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. This process was supported by extensive memo writing and the constant comparison of emerging themes. The collaborative nature of this process aligns with the Gioia methodology's emphasis on reflexivity and shared meaning-making (Gioia et al., 2013; Tracey and Jarvis, 2007).

Fig. 1 illustrates the data structure. This structure was shared with the interviewees and their feedback was sought to minimize the risk of misinterpretation. Table 2 reports examples of interview quotes used for identifying the first-order concepts.

4. Findings

In this section, we present findings from our interviews on how social enterprises use SM in the two stages of the opportunity exploration process: opportunity identification and evaluation.

4.1. Sensemaking using SM for opportunity identification in social enterprises

Our interviewees reported that social opportunities are identified through a combination of individual and collective sensemaking. Individual sensemaking is supported by SM-enabled scanning, in which social enterprises observe and interpret information independently through SM. In contrast, collective sensemaking is enabled by SM-enabled sourcing, which engages external actors to collaboratively explore and refine potential opportunities.

4.1.1. Individual sensemaking using SM for opportunity identification

SM supports individual sensemaking by providing access to online information that social enterprises can analyze without directly interacting with the information source. This is achieved through what we term “SM-enabled scanning”, in which social enterprises monitor the external environment by following or subscribing to content, such as posts, links, likes, comments, videos, blogs, and vlogs, shared on the SM profiles of external actors. According to our interviewees, SM-enabled scanning is primarily conducted to understand emerging social issues

and potential solutions. In doing so, they perform broad scans of the SM profiles of a diverse range of organizations without applying specific criteria. In particular, the interviewed social enterprises highlighted the significant benefits of scanning the SM activities of government agencies and NGOs. These organizations often share reports on urgent social and environmental issues on their SM profiles. These reports typically contain detailed information on opportunities, including potential markets and available funding.

“The most effective method of staying informed about pressing social and environmental issues is to engage with X and begin following prominent government and environmental agencies, and NGOs. That is precisely what we did.” (Founder, Nu).

Some interviewed social enterprises also monitored the SM profiles of CSR divisions within reputable firms known for their impactful and locally respected CSR initiatives. This enabled the social enterprises to grasp the social issues these established firms were seeking to address. By following these CSR profiles on SM, social enterprises received notifications whenever for-profit organizations and/or their CSR departments released any social impact, sustainability, or CSR reports.

“The tweets include links to the companies' CSR reports and provide a summary of what to expect in the report. If I find a tweet that talks about a social problem that excites me, I go and read their full CSR report.” (Founder, Kappa).

Further, the interviewed social enterprises also reported benefitting from subscribing to and scanning the SM profiles of fellow local and international social enterprises/entrepreneurs and receiving regular updates about profitable opportunities.

“YouTube is such a valuable platform for people like us. You can subscribe to social entrepreneurs who regularly talk about burning social issues and what they have been doing to solve such issues. Following their vlogs was so informative for us to see where we can make an impact with our start-up.” (Staff member, Xi).

Interviewees also mentioned that they scanned Facebook groups discussing local, regional, and national social and environmental problems. They regularly reviewed posts made by group members. For instance, during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the world was grappling with numerous challenges, Lamda recognized several areas where they could make meaningful contributions. While Lamda knew that the social and health problems caused by COVID-19 presented a clear opportunity to make an impact, it was uncertain about which specific issues to address. To better understand the problems communities faced and identify where they could provide value, they joined a variety of public Facebook groups. One group they joined was broad and general, focusing on issues faced by households and businesses during COVID-19, such as financial strain, changes in work-life balance, and disruptions to daily routines. They also joined more specific groups that discussed niche topics such as “managing work from home”, “COVID-19 and mental health”, “vaccine discussions”, “COVID-19 regulation updates”, “health and safety protocols and tips”, “small business support”, and “emergency workers' practice sharing”. Each group presented valuable insights into the challenges faced by people.

Lamda adopted an observational approach, without directly engaging with group members. Over nearly three months, Lamda systematically tracked posts, comments, and engagement patterns within these groups. Lamda focused on identifying recurring themes, noting which topics attracted the most interaction, such as high numbers of likes, shares, and comments, as indicators of widespread concern or urgent needs. This extended observation period allowed Lamda to build a clearer picture of where their intervention could be most impactful, while also ensuring that they did not rush into action without sufficient insights. The goal was to avoid wasting time and resources in areas with low impact potential.

“We did not want to jump into something just because it seemed important at first glance. By observing what people were consistently talking about for a few months, we could see which problems were persistent and truly mattered to the community.” (Staff member,

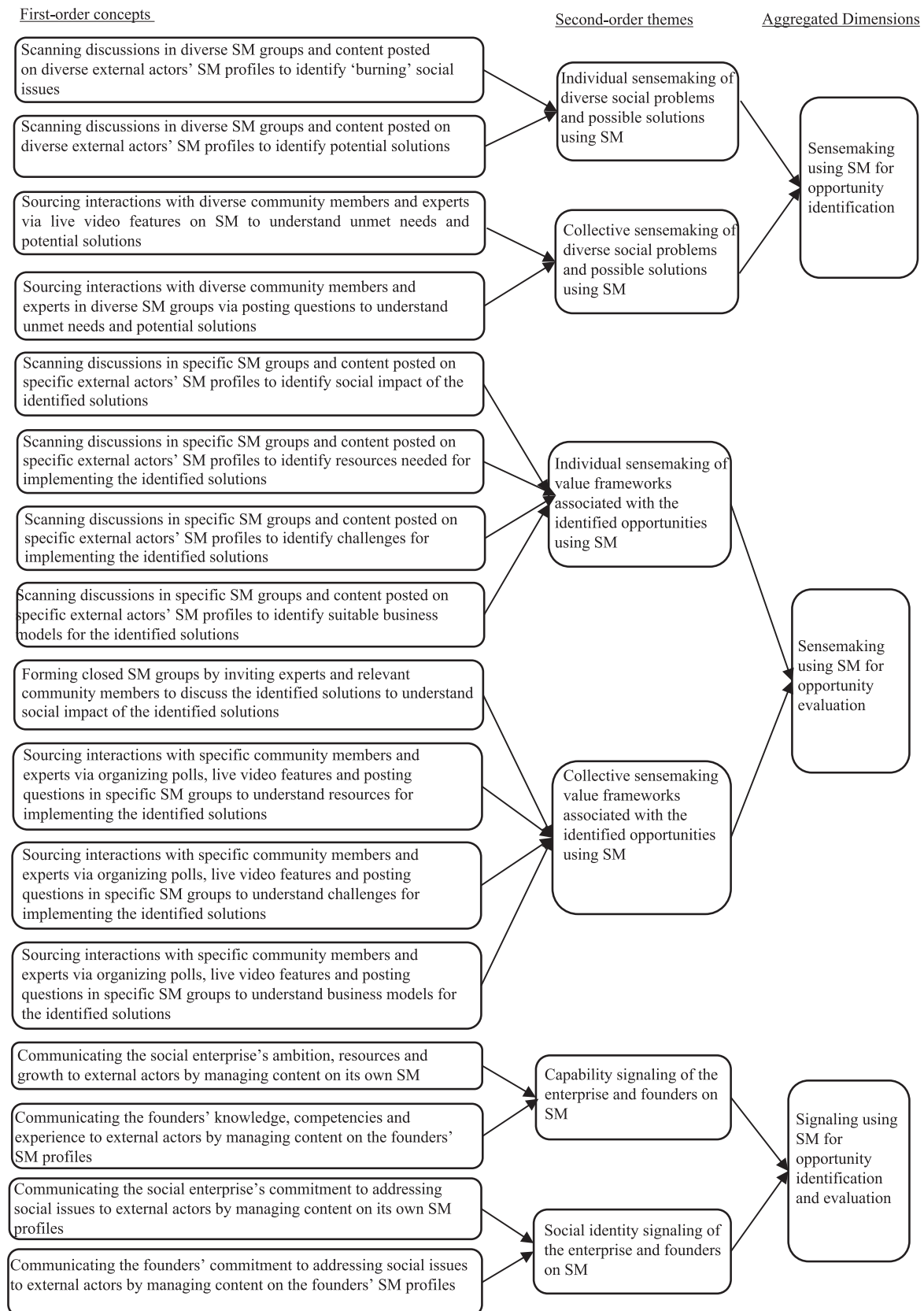


Fig. 1. Data structure with the first-order concepts, second-order themes and aggregated dimensions.

Table 2

Example quotes for first-order concepts, second-order themes and applied theory in the data structure.

Representative quotations	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Theory used
“Their [the government agency for promoting social entrepreneurship] Twitter account regularly posts about pressing social issues, which I and many other entrepreneurs found to be really useful for identifying social projects that could attract funds and generate genuine social impact.”	Scanning discussions in diverse SM groups and content posted on diverse external actors' SM profiles to identify ‘burning’ social issues	Individual sensemaking of diverse social problems and possible solutions using SM	Sensemaking theory
“I am a member of several LinkedIn and Facebook groups, where lots of discussions take place daily about various problems that exist in our neighborhoods and what can we do to address these problems. These discussions were definitely an eye opener’ [for me].”	Scanning discussions in diverse SM groups and content posted on diverse external actors' SM profiles to identify potential solutions		
“There is no readymade solution for the complex and multifaceted problems that we aim to solve through our venture. Interactions with communities help us better understand the problems and construct possible solutions... and Facebook is a great tool to initiate such interactions. We benefitted significantly from the live videos.”	Sourcing interactions with diverse community members and experts via live video features on SM to understand unmet needs and potential solutions	Collective sensemaking of diverse social problems and possible solutions using SM	
“One way to engage experts to talk about social and environmental issues is to post open-ended questions in (SM) groups and tag (or invite) the experts (who are also members of the group) to post their comments.”	Sourcing interactions with diverse community members and experts in diverse SM groups via posting questions to understand unmet needs and potential solutions		
“When we first started brainstorming ideas, we kept asking ourselves one main thing: what kind of impact	Scanning discussions in specific SM groups and content posted on specific external actors' SM profiles	Individual sensemaking of value frameworks associated with the	

Table 2 (continued)

Representative quotations	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Theory used
could each of these have on society, both now and in the long run? It is the same question we ask whenever we see what people are talking about online.”	to identify social impact of the identified solutions	identified opportunities using SM	
“Once you know what you want to do, you need to see if any funding is available for the problem that you aim to solve or the solution that you are proposing. In this regard, going through the websites and SM accounts of government bodies can be quite helpful.”	Scanning discussions in specific SM groups and content posted on specific external actors' SM profiles to identify resources needed for implementing the identified solutions	“In the early days, I would regularly watch videos posted by successful entrepreneurs in my area. They motivate you, yes. But that is not the only reason why I watched them. The information I received about potential funding, shortcuts and institutional obstacles is priceless.”	
	Scanning discussions in specific SM groups and content posted on specific external actors' SM profiles to identify challenges for implementing the identified solutions	Scanning discussions in specific SM groups and content posted on specific external actors' SM profiles to identify suitable business models for the identified solutions	
	“When you follow the SM profiles of CSR divisions and other social enterprises, they sometimes give away information about their business models through their Tweets and posts, which is quite beneficial for newcomers like us. This allows us to benchmark our business models against theirs.”		
“We used LinkedIn to form a private group for connecting with consultants who have helped similar ventures like ours to pursue opportunities in the past and then we organized meetings to better understand the exploitation process”.	Forming closed SM groups by inviting experts and relevant community members to discuss the identified solutions to understand social impact of the identified solutions	Collective sensemaking of value frameworks associated with the identified opportunities using SM	
“Sometimes we would post questions like	Sourcing interactions with		

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Representative quotations	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Theory used
<i>'what do you think about our proposition, i.e., whether the solution that we are proposing will solve the problem and at the same time commercially viable'. In some other groups, we conducted an opinion poll to get a more measurable response."</i>	specific community members and experts via organizing polls, live video features and posting questions in specific SM groups to understand resources for implementing the identified solutions		
<i>"Our meetings unearthed some challenges that we did not envisage before such as security and safety involved in organizing mobile arts studios and permissions required for setting up community mentoring hubs."</i>	Sourcing interactions with specific community members and experts via organizing polls, live video features and posting questions in specific SM groups to understand challenges for implementing the identified solutions "Comments from CSR leads was extremely helpful in understanding how we can generate money from the training programs, especially the type of membership models that we can adopt."		
<i>"Our posts featured short video clips with testimonials from local councils and homeless citizens. This clearly demonstrated that we had established strong on-the-ground partnerships, which will be essential for delivering on our promises moving forward."</i>	Communicating the social enterprise's ambition, resources and growth to external actors by managing content on its own SM	Capability signaling of the enterprise and founders on SM	Signaling theory
<i>"If anyone wants to know about the founder, his or her abilities and experience, the first thing they will do is visit the website and LinkedIn profile. So,</i>	Communicating the founders' knowledge, competencies and experience to external actors by managing content		

Table 2 (continued)

Representative quotations	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Theory used
<i>a solid and attractive LinkedIn profile is a must for any entrepreneur."</i>	on the founders' SM profiles		
<i>"You need to reveal certain information about the aims and objectives of your venture on crowdsourcing pages, because this gives confidence to investors that they are investing in the right cause."</i>	Communicating the social enterprise's commitment to addressing social issues to external actors by managing content on its own SM profiles	Social identity signaling of the enterprise and founders on SM	
<i>"People will also want to know how interested you are in making a positive change to the society. That's why I tend to constantly tweet about social issues."</i>	Communicating the founders' commitment to addressing social issues to external actors by managing content on the founders' SM profiles		

Lamda).

Despite these advantages, SM-enabled scanning presents several challenges. A primary challenge lies in determining the scanning scope. Interviewed social enterprises often struggled to determine how many organizations to scan within each stakeholder group and when to stop the process. For example, Nu monitored posts from all 46 organizations they followed over two years to identify prevalent problems and potential solutions. Yet, they were unsure if it was sufficient. Consequently, social enterprises expressed uncertainty about when they had gathered enough information to identify all possible opportunities. Another challenge is information overload. The volume of posts can be overwhelming. Several interviewees mentioned that they lacked data analytics skills, forcing them to review each SM profile manually to interpret the posts.

"I know that text mining tools can be used to systematically analyze SM data, but I do not have such skills. I just keep notes of interesting things appearing on my Twitter feed." (Founder, Omicron).

Additionally, scanning the profiles of numerous organizations and reviewing their daily content requires significant time, leading to fatigue and a sense of disconnection from the real world.

"Ideally, I would like to go through the comments on each post. When a popular NGO posts about a social problem on Facebook or LinkedIn or uploads a video on YouTube, there can be more than 2,000 comments. I read some of the initial comments but not all. I do not have that much time." (Founder, Epsilon).

The interviewees identified another significant challenge. The lack of interaction with information providers restricted social enterprises' ability to gain deeper insights into the problems or potential solutions they were exploring. The interviewees argued that, while SM-enabled scanning offered a wealth of data, it did not provide them with opportunities to ask clarifying questions, understand the context or validate the relevance of the issues they uncover.

"To know the root causes of problems, we had to speak with people. We could not just rely on data." (Volunteer, Omicron).

The inherently passive nature of SM-enabled scanning often results in a limited, surface-level comprehension of complex issues by social enterprises. For example, Zeta identified recurring concerns on SM regarding inadequate access to government-funded mid-career training programs for women re-entering the workforce following career interruptions. However, this method alone failed to uncover the underlying causes of these barriers or the extent to which they differentially

impact subgroups of women based on variables such as age, sectoral affiliation and career stage.

4.1.2. Collective sensemaking using SM for opportunity identification

To navigate the challenges of SM-enabled scanning, the interviewees recommended shifting towards more interactive and participatory approaches on SM, which we call “SM-enabled sourcing”. This means using SM not only to monitor conversations, but also to actively engage with external stakeholders, such as community members, local organizations and domain experts. Through dialogue and feedback, organizations can develop a deeper understanding of the social problems.

For example, Nu, a social enterprise focused on enhancing graduate employability, moved beyond passive monitoring to actively engage recent graduates in Facebook groups, asking targeted questions about their educational experiences and how well their training prepared them for industry demands. Examples of such posts (questions) include “What do you believe is the biggest challenge in accessing educational resources, and how can we work together to solve it?”. Nu also reached out to industry practitioner groups on LinkedIn with posts such as “What problems do you see in terms of talent management in your industry?”. These interactions provided Nu with insights that would have been inaccessible through scanning alone. Participants shared detailed stories, personal frustrations, and concrete barriers, allowing Nu to move from identifying general problems to pinpointing actionable sub-issues. Nu identified that many degree programs failed to equip students with applied engineering skills, that recent graduates often lacked advanced digital competencies for interdisciplinary problem solving, and that business ethics training was largely absent from university curricula.

Interviewees noted, however, that not all SM platforms are equally effective for deeper engagement. Platforms like X, due to format constraints, often limit the depth of interaction. Although some enterprises used polls to gauge the urgency of social issues, these tools provided little insight into the reasoning or lived experiences behind responses, which is essential for understanding complex challenges. In contrast, Facebook was seen as more conducive to meaningful dialogue, supporting longer posts, threaded discussions, and the tagging of prominent community members or organizations, which encouraged broader participation. As participants responded, their networks often joined the discussion, sparking dynamic, multi-perspective conversations. This interactive environment enabled social enterprises to collect richer, more contextualized feedback.

Interviewees from Gamma shared another example of SM-enabled collective sensemaking. They reached out to two community leaders on LinkedIn, who helped organize a Facebook Live session between the founder and community members, allowing both parties to exchange knowledge about community challenges and potential solutions. They suggested two benefits of using Facebook Live (or similar platforms allowing live videos) for such community discussions. First, Facebook Live allows participants to tag themselves, resulting in an increased likelihood of being viewed by their friends. Thus, community leaders showed interest because their reputation could improve if videos organizing community-industry collaborative activities were shared on SM. According to our interviewees, community leaders usually show a willingness to share their knowledge of social opportunities with social enterprises; however, in return, they may expect benefits in the form of improved legitimacy, which can positively influence their careers. Second, Facebook Live often triggers a cascading effect: comments from the founders' friends and those of participating community leaders expand the discussion, helping social enterprises better understand social problems and refine opportunities.

“The video got close to 1,000 views, 250 comments and 300 likes. People that I did not know commented on the video and shared insightful opinions.” (Founder, Gamma).

Enterprises using SM-enabled sourcing acknowledged challenges. Zeta noted that although interactive posts generated hundreds of comments, not all were relevant or actionable. The open nature of SM

platforms meant anyone could respond, including those with limited knowledge. Some information may have come from fake profiles. This created a dual challenge: inconsistent data quality and participants who were not always the most informed or affected.

“We wanted community input, but sometimes the most active voices were not the ones with the deepest knowledge.” (Staff member, Mu).

Interviewees also struggled to define engagement scope, decide how many SM groups to join, how many posts to make, and when to stop. They also noted that fake news on SM hindered efforts to identify pressing social problems, as misinformation could divert attention to exaggerated or fabricated issues.

“You might see a post go viral on Twitter, you spend a day or two thinking about it and researching it. But later realize it was not even a real issue. It just distracts from what truly matters.” (Volunteer, Iota).

4.2. Sensemaking using SM for opportunity evaluation in social enterprises

We found that during the opportunity evaluation stage, SM-enabled scanning and SM-enabled sourcing supports individual and collective sensemaking of the identified opportunities. However, these scanning and sourcing activities are carried out differently compared to how they are conducted during the opportunity identification stage, as explained below.

4.2.1. Individual sensemaking using SM for opportunity evaluation

To evaluate opportunities, interviewed social enterprises adopted a more targeted form of SM-enabled scanning, focusing on the SM profiles of organizations with expertise in addressing the identified problems and solutions. To identify relevant profiles, they often searched for problem- or solution-specific hashtags on SM platforms. For example, Zeta used hashtags such as #womenempowerment, #womentraining, #womenskills, #womencareer, #returningwomen, #returning-frommaternityleave and #womencouragement to locate organizations offering training to women returning to work. Next, they reviewed SM content of these organizations to explore the resources, capabilities, and time commitments required to pursue similar opportunities. However, not all enterprises preferred hashtag searches, as the overwhelming results made it difficult to choose relevant profiles. Even those who used them prioritized highly engaged profiles with many followers, frequent posts, and active comments.

Interviewees emphasized that the primary factor in evaluation was social impact, specifically the issues being addressed and the benefits to communities and society at large. Accordingly, they analyzed the SM profiles of government bodies, NGOs, and peer social enterprises to assess both the short- and long-term benefits of opportunities. Nonetheless, the interviewees argued that assessing economic potential remained essential. While government and NGO profiles highlighted societal benefits, the SM profiles of corporations and peer enterprises offered insights into financial returns. Together, these insights helped the social enterprises to identify opportunities with potential social and economic outcomes. Interviewees also noted that knowing how many other social enterprises operated in a given area was crucial for assessing an opportunity's uniqueness and potential contribution.

Moreover, interviewees explained that scanning SM content from relevant organizations helped them anticipate the processes, resources, and capabilities needed to deliver proposed solutions. CSR divisions, NGOs, and peer enterprises often share project reports or updates offering practical insights into value creation. For example, Zeta followed a European entrepreneur's blog that regularly documented how she secured new capabilities and funding. These posts highlighted operational requirements the founder had not previously anticipated.

“I have been following a European lady's blog for about three years now. Every month, she posts blogs about how she has acquired new capabilities and funds to run her company. These blogs have introduced me to several hidden resource needs, which I never envisaged.”

(Founder, Zeta).

Alpha abandoned an idea for a digital platform for street artists after reviewing the SM of a similar initiative.

"We identified an opportunity to develop a digital platform that could unite street artists and organize concerts in a more structured way. Facebook videos from a similar platform-driven social enterprise showed us exactly what skills were required to build such a platform. I eventually dropped the idea because it would take me ages to acquire those app development skills." (Founder, Alpha).

For funding, the social enterprises primarily monitored the SM profiles of government agencies and NGOs. Several interviewees noted that they followed funding scheme pages, which frequently posted updates on past, current and upcoming awards related to social issues. The social enterprises also used SM to assess potential partnerships and collaborations. Monitoring the SM profiles of external actors helped the interviewed enterprises identify potential partners. Mu shared that large multinational corporations often fund local initiatives through their CSR programs and appoint social enterprises as delivery agents. Such partnership opportunities are typically announced on the SM profiles of CSR teams. Some interviewees also followed the SM pages of university-affiliated or government-supported entrepreneurship centers to explore incubator and accelerator programs for early-stage ventures.

"We have found that keeping track of larger corporations' CSR updates on SM not only gives us a sense of their focus areas but also opens opportunities for collaboration. This is a great way to stay informed about potential funding or partnerships." (Founder, Beta).

Interviewees noted that isolation and fatigue remain persistent challenges when using SM-enabled scanning for opportunity evaluation. Another key limitation is that it often lacks critical information about the practical challenges of implementing solutions. Understanding these challenges is essential for assessing the feasibility of an opportunity.

"Everyone wants to promote their company by publishing success stories on SM, but we hear very little about the failures and the challenges they could not address." (Founder, Xi).

4.2.2. Collective sensemaking using SM for opportunity evaluation

The limitations of SM-enabled scanning compel social enterprises to practice collective sensemaking with external stakeholders for opportunity evaluation. SM can facilitate such interactions in different ways. For example, several enterprises used polls in SM groups to crowdsource feedback during opportunity evaluation. These polls often included a brief description of the social problem, followed by a set of potential solutions. Respondents were invited to vote and provide comments, particularly around impact and feasibility. Beta, known for community-based art initiatives, ran a poll in a local artists' Facebook group to test delivery models for a youth mentorship program. Members ranked three options: mobile art studios, weekend workshops, and permanent community hubs similar to makerspaces. Comments revealed logistical concerns such as access and safety, which Beta had not previously considered.

"The voting gave us a general preference, but the discussion thread helped us think through the logistics. Some parents said that mobile studios were great because their children would not have to travel a lot. Others had concerns about weather and space, and also about the membership model." (Volunteer, Beta).

Iota, which employs ex-convicts and the homeless through recycling initiatives, opted for more open-ended community engagement instead of multiple-choice polls. They posted questions such as: "Which of these ideas do you think would best support people transitioning back into work?" and "What is one thing that makes it hard for someone like you to keep a job?"

"We knew what sounded good on paper, but we needed to know what might actually work. The comments gave us stories, objections, support and even ideas we had not thought about." (Founder, Iota).

Enterprises noted that polls and open-ended SM questions helped form a general sense of solution suitability. However, detailed

information about resources, challenges, and business models was usually gathered through in-person discussions. Enterprises also had to provide adequate information about their capabilities, resources, and ambitions to enable participants to contribute meaningfully. The interviewees stressed that evaluating opportunities through SM is not only about sharing ideas publicly; rather, it is about building a shared understanding with a trusted, carefully chosen group.

"You cannot just go into a [live] session and say, 'Tell us what you think'. We had to first explain our model, what we can do, what we cannot do, and what our goals are. Otherwise, people give advice that may not fit at all." (Staff member, Zeta).

For in-depth discussions, some enterprises used Facebook Live and live sessions on other SM platforms to evaluate opportunities with external actors. However, the responses noted a clear shift in using this approach between the opportunity identification and evaluation stages. The interviewees clarified that, unlike in the opportunity identification phase, these sessions were not made publicly accessible. Instead, they were conducted within closed or private groups on SM platforms.

"We do run live discussions, but not openly. These are closed sessions in private Facebook groups where we invited specific people, such as tech educators, AI experts, and organizations working on similar problems. At this stage, we are no longer merely exploring ideas. We are discussing how we can make some money off it and be self-sustainable, and honestly, that is not something we want to share publicly." (Staff members, Nu).

These private sessions were designed to protect sensitive business information, especially discussions of value creation and capture strategies. Thus, discussions were structured for open dialogue among curated experts, partners, and stakeholders, enabling feedback without compromising competitive advantage.

"In the early stage, we publicly used live streams to hear women and community members about the problems they face. However, when we planned our career mentorship program, the sessions became private. We invited HR managers, gender inclusion advocates and policy experts. These were focused conversations about program design, funding channels, and long-term value." (Founder, Zeta).

The private nature of these SM-enabled live sessions helped to create a safe, focused space for discussing strategic concerns. Enterprises themselves formed these groups, selecting participants for their expertise in the social issue and potential to refine the business model.

"We invited some of the same people who gave feedback in the early stages, but also added new ones, especially people with business backgrounds or experience in AI ethics. The idea was to integrate social needs with a viable business model." (Staff members, Nu).

However, because these groups were curated by the social enterprises and included only selected individuals, there was a risk of excluding key stakeholders or experts who could have contributed valuable insights. The social enterprises typically assigned themselves as group administrators and restricted participants from adding new members.

"If you give members the freedom to add their friends, it is no longer a private space, and your know-how could leak. So, we keep it private and restrict that freedom, but we understand that doing so may cause missing out on important voices." (Founder, Mu).

Another challenge with SM-enabled sourcing in both identification and evaluation stages is motivating communities to participate in the process. Interviewees noted that although SM provides access to wider networks, engagement in knowledge-sourcing is not guaranteed. For instance, a community member may accept a social enterprise's connection request on LinkedIn but refuse to engage further if they doubt the enterprise's credibility or capabilities.

"Initially, when our Facebook page was new, people would accept our invitation, follow our pages, and like our content; however, when we asked them to fill out a survey, the response rate was low. They did not always see us as credible enough to trust." (Founder, Epsilon).

4.3. Signaling using SM for opportunity identification and evaluation

In addition to sensemaking, interviewed social enterprises used SM to signal their capabilities and identity to the external environment. This signaling is done at the organizational and individual (founder) levels.

4.3.1. Signaling enterprise and founders' capabilities

Social enterprises use SM to convey their capabilities to external audiences to build credibility and legitimacy, and to entice external actors to contribute to the SM-enabled sourcing process. Interviewees noted that before committing to sharing knowledge about opportunities, community members often assess the enterprise's legitimacy and motives by reviewing its online presence, especially its company profiles and the professional backgrounds of its stakeholders and founders.

"Before someone agrees to collaborate with us, they always check our LinkedIn page. In fact, this is what we do, when we get such requests. People want to know who you are and whether you are capable enough to do something serious." (Staff member, Nu).

Interviewees acknowledged that SM served as a primary channel for communicating such information to external audiences. However, due to their early-stage status, these organizations encountered constraints to demonstrate a substantial history of organizational experience. Since they were still identifying and evaluating opportunities and had yet to establish core operations, delivery models, or partnerships, they could not rely on retrospective narratives of past successes to signal their capabilities. To address this limitation, most of the enterprises adopted a forward-looking approach to capability signaling. Instead of emphasizing organizational achievements, they highlighted the professional competencies and domain expertise of their founding teams. This often involved embedding links to founders' professional profiles, particularly on LinkedIn and discussing their achievements, allowing them to demonstrate operational readiness, even without extensive organizational history.

"We rode on the capabilities of our excellent founding team, who have led CSR teams for big corporations for decades. We highlighted on SM the different projects that they led and how they came up with the idea for this enterprise. The founder even asked me to include my prior involvement with the equality and diversity committee at a university, as it aligned with the company's focus on women empowerment." (Staff member, Zeta).

Moreover, the enterprises used SM to provide both visual and narrative evidence of their early-stage engagements. Through photos and videos of field visits and stakeholder meetings, they presented themselves as active and competent actors within their target communities. They also used short video testimonials from community members and early collaborators to enhance perceived legitimacy and competence. These testimonials typically expressed appreciation for the enterprises' efforts to address real, on-the-ground problems, thereby reinforcing their perceived capacity to identify local needs and respond effectively.

Another important signal of capability was the portrayal of partnerships. Enterprises frequently posted videos and photos to demonstrate that they had established relationships with community stakeholders who helped them identify pressing social issues and explore context-specific solutions. Several enterprises also emphasized the importance of having large followings on Instagram, X, Facebook, and LinkedIn. They viewed these metrics as visible indicators of connectedness, reach, and relevance within the broader social and professional landscape. Iota offered an illustrative example. It posted videos of meetings with local councils and formerly incarcerated individuals to explore possible employment support programmes. Once shared across Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, the content attracted several thousand likes, shares, and comments. Notably, some of the comments came from well-known social enterprises, NGOs, and even celebrities. Iota then took screenshots of the engagement—highlighting the endorsements and wide reach—and reposted them to further

promote its growing visibility and following.

SM also enables signaling of the individual competencies, experiences, achievements and credibility of the founders. Founders are often seen as the face of the enterprise, particularly in the early stages, and their personal legitimacy plays a central role in attracting collaborators. Interviewees emphasized that potential partners, donors, and community members routinely examine founders' SM profiles to assess their qualifications, motivations, and ability to deliver on the enterprise's mission. This scrutiny includes evaluating academic and professional backgrounds, endorsements, and even the tone of SM activity.

"People want to know who is behind the organization. They are not just looking at the company name. They Google us, check our profiles and read what we post." (Founder, Beta).

To build credibility, founders used SM bios and regular posts to showcase their achievements, experience, and affiliations. Experienced entrepreneurs emphasized successful past ventures, while newer founders leaned on education, achievements and connections to well-known organizations.

"I do not have a track record yet, but I make sure my LinkedIn shows the fellowship I completed, the pitch competitions I have participated in, and the mentors who back me." (Founder, Delta).

Others explicitly connected their background to venture goals, using SM to narrate their journey and underline personal relevance and competence.

"We put our background in music and community work right upfront. Our followers need to know that we have experience organizing large-scale events, even as a small team." (Staff member, Alpha).

The interviewees also highlighted that LinkedIn recommendations played an important role in demonstrating their capabilities. Most entrepreneurs noted that they actively sought endorsements from a diverse range of stakeholders. They particularly value recommendations from the third sector, especially members of the community, NGOs and other social enterprises. These endorsements serve two purposes: they validate the entrepreneur's ability to execute social projects and showcase their expertise in creating social value.

"When I launched my social enterprise, I reached out to the NGO where I had volunteered for about three years to write a recommendation for me on LinkedIn. I really wanted to demonstrate not just my interest but also my capability in working on societal initiatives." (Founder, Mu).

4.3.2. Signaling enterprise and founders' identity

Interviewees also highlighted that prospective participants in the sourcing process want to know whether enterprises and their founders genuinely care about social value creation or seek to maximize economic returns. Participants often assess this social entrepreneurial identity through information shared on SM. Enterprises and founders signal their social entrepreneurial identity by regularly posting about social issues, engaging with external actors, and endorsing local, participatory, grassroots, and community initiatives on SM.

"People messaged me to ask if they [Theta] are using the topic of sexual violence for branding. That is why we agree that we should constantly post survivor stories and collaborate with real advocacy groups. It is about building trust." (Community member, Theta).

According to interviewees, consistent interactions with social issues, posting content related to grassroots initiatives, and engaging with comments and messages reinforce this prosocial identity. Participating in SM group discussions and live sessions with community members also communicates the enterprise's social identity, showing genuine commitment to solving social problems and collaboration with communities.

"When we go live with our team, including young people with intellectual disabilities, it is not just about promoting our work. People see our processes, values, and how we involve the community. That builds a different kind of trust." (Founder, Delta).

As social enterprises move from opportunity identification to

evaluation, many adjust their SM profiles to reflect evolving specializations. After moving beyond opportunity identification, enterprises focus SM content on issues closely related to the opportunities they are evaluating. The SM profiles are updated regularly to reflect this. For example, the X bio of Zeta initially read “A social enterprise determined to improve people's lives” but changed to “A social enterprise empowering women to transform communities” as it focused on women's empowerment towards the end of the opportunity evaluation stage. Similarly, Gamma, a social enterprise specializing in sheltering abandoned animals, updated its bio from “We care about society and environment” to “We are a social enterprise specializing in animal welfare: rescue, care and rehome”. Its hashtags also shifted from “#environment #socialcare #communitylove” to “#animalwelfare #animallove #findinghomesforanimals”. This illustrates how SM can facilitate the transformation of a social enterprise's identity.

However, social enterprises and founders should be mindful of sending potentially negative signals that could harm their reputation or alienate potential stakeholders. While communicating their social entrepreneurial identity is important, interviewees emphasized avoiding signals that could appear anti-business or anti-government.

“The company [Beta] used to post a lot of critical content about how businesses overlook arts and culture. When I came onboard, I suggested that they would be alienating potential sponsors who did not align with that viewpoint. We collectively changed our approach to be more inclusive and less critical, especially on SM, which is highly visible to outsiders.” (Volunteer, Beta).

“We had to tone down our critique of public health policies. We were told that by one of the potential investors, that our SM posts are sometimes reviewed during funding rounds. We need to stand for something but be careful not to isolate anyone.” (Founder, Lamda).

5. Discussion and conclusion

Addressing our first research question (RQ1), we identified two distinct mechanisms through which social enterprises use content posted by external actors on SM for opportunity identification and evaluation: SM-enabled scanning and SM-enabled sourcing. SM-enabled scanning involves passive monitoring of content published by others on SM. This allows enterprises to observe, interpret, and identify emerging social issues and potential areas for intervention. SM-enabled sourcing involves interaction with external actors on SM, facilitating a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of social problems and potential solutions, which is often not attainable through passive scanning alone.

Drawing on sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995), SM-enabled scanning represents individual sensemaking of social opportunities, as social enterprises do not engage in interactions with the content uploader/provider. The scanning mechanism varies between the opportunity identification and evaluation stages. For opportunity identification, given the uncertainty around which problems to address, enterprises often explore a broad range of SM profiles. We term this activity “SM-enabled generic scanning”. For opportunity evaluation, social enterprises use SM-enabled scanning in a more targeted way. This “SM-enabled focused scanning” involves assessing the identified opportunities by analyzing the value framework (Teece, 2010; Zott et al., 2011), including value proposition, creation mechanisms, and key partnerships, by following the SM content of actors with domain-specific expertise.

A key issue with SM-enabled generic scanning is defining the approach's scope. Too broad a scope may result in large volumes of data, leading to information overload (Jabeen et al., 2023). Additionally, in SM-enabled generic scanning, social enterprises risk exposure to fake news, which can construct false narratives (Chaudhuri et al., 2025) and misidentify irrelevant or less important social issues as potential opportunities. Moreover, limited interaction during both SM-enabled generic and focused scanning can lead to isolation (Hattingh et al., 2022) and a shallow understanding of complex social issues. Therefore,

collective sensemaking becomes crucial.

SM-enabled sourcing represents collective sensemaking as it allows more collaborative efforts to understand social problems (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012) and break them into manageable components (Kimmitt and Muñoz, 2018). These exchanges may involve inductive reasoning, where community leaders share emerging concerns, or deductive reasoning, in which enterprises propose ideas and seek feedback (Locke, 2007). SM-enabled sourcing also varies between the opportunity exploration stages. During opportunity identification, social enterprises engage in discussions on SM to interact openly with diverse stakeholders and to explore a wide range of social problems and solutions. We term this activity “SM-enabled open sourcing”. However, defining the sourcing scope remains a challenge. Moreover, the uneven expertise among participants introduces concerns about the reliability of the information gathered. This finding aligns with prior literature that highlights the prevalence of fake profiles on SM, which can distort discussions, contributing little to meaningful insight generation (e.g., Iandoli et al., 2021). The opportunity evaluation stage is marked by “SM-enabled closed sourcing”, which involves more focused interactions within closed SM groups. While this controlled setting fosters in-depth dialogue with selected actors, it also risks exclusion of key voices. Further, to elicit informed feedback, social enterprises must “give sense” (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) of their internal goals, capabilities, and resources, which can result in the spillover of sensitive or proprietary information.

Addressing RQ2, we found that social enterprises leverage their own SM content to identify and evaluate opportunities through SM-enabled signaling. By drawing on signaling theory (Spence, 1973), we define SM-enabled signaling as the deliberate management of an enterprise's own SM content to communicate its capabilities and identity to external audiences. SM enables social enterprises to send two types of signals at the organizational and founder levels: identity and capability signals. Prior research emphasizes that such signaling can enhance legitimacy and access to key resources (Colombo, 2021; Spanuth and Urbano, 2024). Consistent with this, our cases show that SM-enabled signaling helps attract external actors to participate in SM-enabled sourcing activities (or collective sensemaking), ultimately supporting both opportunity identification and evaluation. Our findings further demonstrate that social enterprises adopt an adaptable social identity during the opportunity exploration process. Social enterprises use SM to adapt their public image by sharing general content during the identification stage to project a broad social identity, and more specific content during evaluation to reflect a niche social identity (Borah and Ellwood, 2022; Czakon et al., 2024). However, signaling must be carefully managed to avoid sending unintentional and negative signals (Connelly et al., 2011), such as appearing anti-business or anti-government.

5.1. Implications for research

This study makes several significant contributions to the literature on social entrepreneurship and SM. First, we respond to Yáñez-Valdés et al.'s (2023) call for researching digital social enterprises as a new paradigm for addressing social needs through digital technologies. By focusing on SM, we illustrate how social enterprises can employ SM across two critical phases of opportunity exploration: opportunity identification and opportunity evaluation.

Second, this study contributes to the ongoing debate about whether opportunities are discovered or created. The interviewed social enterprises used SM primarily to discover opportunities. While prior literature has extensively examined opportunity discovery (e.g., Ardichvili et al., 2003; Fultz and Hmieleski, 2021), it has largely focused on individual entrepreneurs and their unique ability to recognize overlooked opportunities (Corner and Ho, 2010; Hock-Doeppen et al., 2025). In contrast, we shift the focus from entrepreneurial traits to digital tools, showing how SM-enabled scanning and SM-enabled sourcing can help better understand social problems and discover solutions.

We offer two key contributions to the SM literature. First, our study provides context-specific insights by focusing on social enterprises. This is an area that has received limited attention in SM research, which has primarily concentrated on large commercial firms (Bhimani et al., 2019; Han et al., 2025). Second, our exploration of the challenges associated with SM-enabled generic and focused scanning, as well as SM-enabled open and closed sourcing, contributes to the growing body of literature on the dark sides of SM use (Chaudhuri et al., 2025; Iandoli et al., 2021).

Finally, we make theoretical contributions. We advance sensemaking theory by offering new evidence on the role of individual sensemaking in exploring social opportunities. There is a lack of empirical research on when firms pursue individual sensemaking and what happens during it (Hoyte et al., 2019). Although previous studies (e.g., Cardon et al., 2011) have acknowledged scanning as a sensemaking approach, several key questions remain. For instance: how is scanning performed, what exactly is scanned, can it be organized digitally, does it facilitate individual or collective sensemaking (or both), and does it lead to the exploration of new opportunities? Our study addresses these gaps.

Regarding collective sensemaking, we provide novel evidence on how it can be digitally facilitated. More specifically, we show how engaging in collective sensemaking with communities contributes not only to opportunity identification but also to the later stage of opportunity evaluation. Prior research has largely concentrated either on collective sensemaking during the identification phase or on the visioning capabilities of enterprises and entrepreneurs essential for opportunity evaluation (Perrini et al., 2010), while overlooking the role of community dialogue in the evaluation process.

We further reveal important connections between signaling, identity, networking, and sensemaking within social enterprises, contributing to all four theoretical frameworks. While previous research on SM has assumed that SM naturally promotes networking (Liu et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020), which our findings support, but argue that SM alone may not be sufficient to build strong ties for collective sensemaking. For social enterprises, signaling a social identity on SM is particularly crucial, as it establishes legitimacy, encouraging community members to engage in collective sensemaking and identify and evaluate social opportunities.

Finally, we contribute to signaling theory by emphasizing the risk of sending unintentional negative signals on SM, such as projecting an anti-business or anti-government identity, particularly when signaling a social identity. Previous research has mainly concentrated on the positive aspects of identity signaling, with limited attention paid to the precautions that should be taken. Our findings also extend the ongoing discourse on identity signaling in digital platforms (Czakov et al., 2024) by introducing a temporal perspective, showing that SM enables the signaling of an adaptable identity during the social entrepreneurial process.

5.2. Implications for practice

This study offers some important implications for social entrepreneurs by providing examples of how SM platforms can be used and the benefits they can bring in the early stages of social entrepreneurship. We show that social enterprises do not have to come up with an in-house SM platform, which we see in large organizations, such as Dell IdeaStorm™ and My Starbucks Idea (Han et al., 2025) and require significant resource investments. Social enterprises can rely only on inexpensive public SM platforms which can also be highly valuable in identifying and evaluating opportunities.

This study presents a practical approach for leveraging SM for opportunity exploration that begins with broad SM-enabled generic scanning to explore a wide range of emerging social issues. This is followed by SM-enabled open sourcing, where enterprises engage with communities to gather additional and/or more nuanced insights into the challenges they face. Together, these steps support opportunity identification. Once initial opportunities are identified, enterprises

should shift to SM-enabled focused scanning and SM-enabled closed sourcing to evaluate the feasibility of specific ideas. At every stage, social enterprises may consider utilizing SM as a means of signaling both the enterprise's and their founders' identity and capabilities, which plays a key role in building legitimacy and encouraging external actors to engage in the SM-enabled sourcing process.

To improve SM-enabled scanning, enterprises should maintain curated watchlists of key NGO, corporate CSR, and government funding pages. Otherwise, the enterprise may end up chasing an endless number of organizations on SM. Additionally, to avoid falling prey to fake news and profiles, social enterprises should follow content posted by credible and verified profiles, especially those with a well-documented background. Moreover, social enterprises could consider developing or acquiring expertise in data analytics through “cross-sector collaborations” (Kim et al., 2024), which can significantly help improve their ability to draw meaningful interpretations of SM data.

To address the limitations of SM-enabled scanning, social enterprises should prioritize structured collective engagement in SM through SM-enabled sourcing. This includes using targeted tools such as polls and open-ended questions within relevant groups to address real concerns and overlooked obstacles. Framing these interactions with clear explanations of the enterprise's goals, constraints, and capabilities helps to ensure that the responses are grounded and useful. To manage the challenge of confidentiality during discussions in relation to business models in the evaluation stage, enterprises may consider shifting from public forums to private curated groups on SM with selected experts and stakeholders. While these groups offer some confidentiality, enforcing formal agreements is difficult on inherently public platforms. Hence, social enterprises should consider implementing informal knowledge protection techniques, such as regularly reminding group members not to share information outside the group.

During the entire opportunity exploration process, the content of the SM profiles of the social enterprises and their founders should clearly convey their mission, experience and capabilities. Social enterprises and their founders should also share authentic stories on SM, highlighting community partnerships and engaging in relevant discussions to signal a genuine prosocial identity. However, they must balance advocacy with sensitivity to ensure that messaging does not alienate potential funders or partners by appearing overly critical or divisive. Finally, consistency across platforms is essential. A clear, unified message may help reinforce credibility and ensure that external stakeholders perceive the enterprise as both competent and socially committed.

5.3. Limitations and future research directions

This study has several limitations that future research could address. First, it focuses solely on South Korea, which may limit the generalizability of its findings. SM usage patterns, including platform preferences, often vary across countries. Future studies could examine how institutional contexts influence the selection and use of SM by social enterprises. Future research could also investigate which culturally contingent norms shape social entrepreneurs' engagement in opportunity exploration on SM.

Second, further methodological work is needed to clarify how social enterprises interpret and analyze data from digital interactions. Future research could ask what methodological approaches can aid social enterprises in sensemaking of SM data during opportunity exploration and how do different forms of user engagement (e.g., likes, comments, shares) signal opportunity relevance or attractiveness?

Third, although the social enterprises we studied used SM across the two stages of opportunity exploration, it is likely that this is not the case universally. Some enterprises may utilize SM primarily for opportunity identification, while others may engage with it mainly during the evaluation stage, particularly when a predefined opportunity already exists. This distinction raises important questions about the strategic use of SM, specifically what factors influence the selective use of SM across

the opportunity exploration stages, and whether it proves more effective in one stage than the other?

Additionally, while our study primarily focused on the perspective of the social enterprise during the sensemaking process, future research should more explicitly incorporate the viewpoint of external stakeholders such as community members and domain experts, especially what factors motivate and constrain these actors' engagement in collective sensemaking with social enterprises on SM.

Future research should investigate the opportunity exploitation phase, focusing on how social enterprises use SM to manage identity construction and signaling. As prior work has shown, social enterprises must often balance dual institutional logics, social and commercial, particularly to reduce tensions when seeking funding from private investors. Key questions for future study include: How social enterprises use SM to construct this hybrid identity? How such signaling influences stakeholder perceptions and legitimacy over time, and whether early-stage identity signals affect later-stage outcomes such as investment, partnership formation and scaling potential?

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Dhruva Borah: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Jihye Kim:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Nicolas Li:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT to improve language and readability. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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