



FH MÜNSTER  
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# ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN A DIGITALIZATION ERA



## The role of digital technologies in social entrepreneurship

Social value proposition | Social value creation process

A scientific whitepaper of the Science-to-Business Marketing Research  
Centre of FH Münster University of Applied Sciences

Science Marketing

Science-to-Business Marketing Research Centre



# „[...] digital technologies can do a great deal for social value creation.“

- An interviewee's answer to the question of how the role of digital technology is perceived in social value creation.



## ABOUT US

This scientific whitepaper was prepared by the participants of the research seminar at the FH Münster University of Applied Sciences under supervision of research associate, Judith Helmer, und supported by the graduate assistants, Selin Kozat and Leonie Pöter, from the Science-to-Business Marketing Research Centre.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Relevance and focus of the study

The recent era of digitization in both society and business has transformed entrepreneurship in its meaning and forms (Giones & Brem, 2017) causing start-ups to use digital technologies to create new digitalized products and services through digital innovations (Giones & Brem, 2017; Elia et al., 2019). This has led to a new stream of literature on digital entrepreneurship, challenging current notions of entrepreneurship research (Nambisan, 2017). This research stream, mainly how digital entrepreneurship integrates **digital technologies** into the business models and how this affects their value creation process, has received much attention (Bican & Brem, 2020; Cruzara et al., 2021).

In the stages of the value creation process, entrepreneurs can leverage digital technologies to create value (Sahut et al., 2021). In recent literature, the use of digital technologies in relation to sustainable value creation has gained attention. Digital business models are helpful for implementing sustainability by creating economic, environmental, and social value simultaneously (Baranauskas & Raisiene, 2022; Holzmann & Gregori, 2022). Studies highlight that digital technologies accelerate socioenvironmental value creation throughout the value proposition, generation, and capture (Baranauskas & Raisiene, 2022; Holzmann & Gregori, 2022).

However, **social value creation** has been neglected concerning digital entrepreneurship even though digital technologies can help create social value by addressing social issues (Jablonski & Jablonski, 2021; Suseno & Abott, 2021). Unlike research regarding the influence of digital technologies on sustainable value creation, the **social entrepreneurship** literature has not focused on the role of digital technologies in the social value creation (Dietz et al., 2022).



In light of this research gap, the present paper adopts an exploratory research method, drawing insights from semi-structured expert interviews to investigate the influence of digital technologies on the venture creation process and the link between digital and entrepreneurial competencies. The overarching research question guiding this investigation is thus:

**How does the use of digital technologies influence the skills of entrepreneurs in their venture creation process?**





# SOCIAL BUSINESS MODEL

The business model concept came up at least since the emergence of the Internet (Amit & Zott, 2001). Although there is a variety of definitions regarding this concept (Zott et al., 2011), researchers widely agree that business models are structural templates that describe how an organization can create and capture value (Schneider & Clauß, 2020). Whereas this value was considered primarily on an economic level, today's companies face an increasing need for integrating a contribution to ecological and social needs (Schneider & Claus, 2020) due to ongoing challenges in society and actively collaborate with governments (George et al., 2016).

With governmental initiatives, emerging peer pressure, and customer demands coming up, increasingly more firms are pursuing economic, ecological, and social value contributions nowadays (Schneider & Clauß, 2020). At the same time, more entrepreneurs are starting social businesses that contribute to the environment and society (Schaltegger et al., 2016). Therefore, social entrepreneurship emerged as a new research stream and as a potential solution for significant social challenges over the last two decades (Seelos & Mair, 2005; Hlady-Rispal & Servantie, 2016).

According to Hlady-Rispal and Servantie (2016), the most remarkable difference between social entrepreneurship and traditional entrepreneurship lies in the business model where returns to society are the main component. Franca et al. (2017) note that traditional business model concepts lack in capturing the specifics relating to the sustainability and social dimension. Therefore, new business model innovations are required that go beyond traditional business models (Franca et al., 2017). Consequently, an increasing number of new business models try to align those two organizational objectives: **Creating social and economic value**. For this, social business models aim to capture the specific aspects of social enterprises (Canestrino et al., 2019).

To understand and design the business model of social enterprises, the Social Business Model Canvas was introduced as an alternative to the original Business Model Canvas (Sparviero, 2019). According to Sparviero (2019), the definition of a business model for social entrepreneurship is "the analysis of the rationale, infrastructure, capabilities and use of resources that enable stakeholders to create value for themselves and for the organization" (p. 243). As the Social Enterprise Model Canvas shows, business models in social entrepreneurship focus on the social value proposition and the creation of social value for specific customers and beneficiaries, apart from purely economic value, in a social and multi-dimensional form of worth (Sparviero, 2019). Therefore, a proper understanding of the concept of social value is essential to explain (Sparviero, 2019).



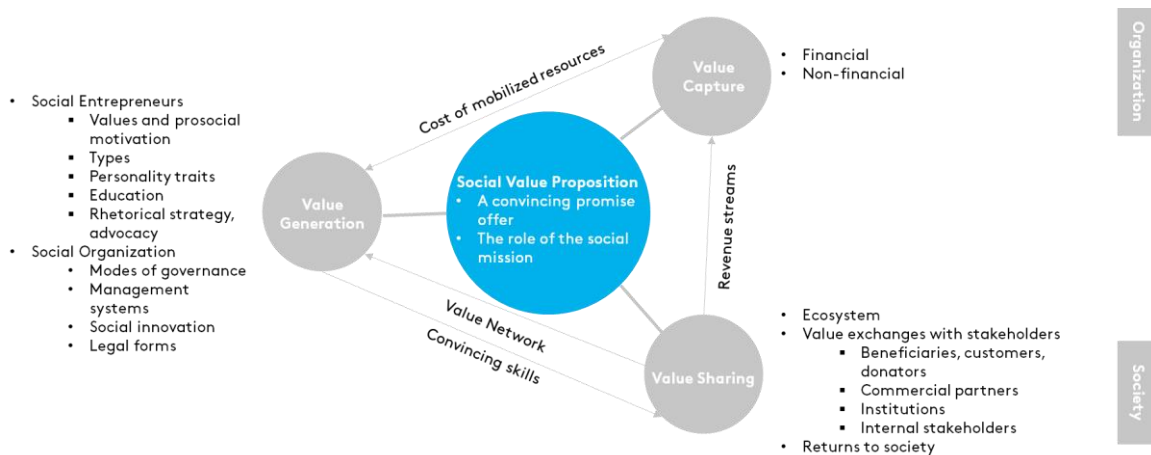


# SOCIAL VALUE CREATION

The definition of **social value** in the literature has been proven controversial (Paoli & Addeo, 2019). This paper aims for a definition of social value with the aid of a three-pillar model dividing the 17 SDGs of the United Nations into an ecological, social, and economic pillar (Paoli & Addeo, 2019).

While the meaning and associated objectives of the ecological and economic pillars are well distinguishable from each other, it remains challenging to identify exclusively social issues, because of a strong linkage between and a significant overlap across the pillars of sustainable development (Paoli & Addeo, 2019; Murphy, 2012). This ambiguity leads to insufficient attention on social sustainability and causes a higher focus on the environmental dimension in sustainability literature (Sajjad & Shabaz, 2020). However, it can be stated that social value is the result of human activities generated by a social network focusing on the development of public goods around social and public sustainability, which is captured by society in the form of a non-financial impact on human and societal well-being, health, and welfare (Ritala et al., 2021; Mehera & Ordonez-Ponce, 2021; Sajjad & Shabaz, 2020). To further explain how social value is created in a social entrepreneurial context, an elaboration of the social value creation process is needed, which this paper adopts from the framework by Hlady-Rispal and Servantie that is shown in figure 1:

Figure 1: Social Value Creation Process Model



Source: Own illustration based on Hlady-Rispal and Servantie (2016)

Value creation comprises a set of activities, resources, and processes required to create and deliver the value proposition to consumers (Lashitew et al., 2020). Therefore, Hlady-Rispal and Servantie (2016) describe the **social value proposition** (dimension 1) as a strategic prerequisite for the underlying dimensions **social value generation** (dimension 2), **social value capture** (dimension 3) and **social value sharing** (dimension 4). The social entrepreneurs within a venture can be seen as a significant source and catalyst of value creation (Hlady-Rispal & Servantie, 2016). The entrepreneurs' focus on social impact creation, values, past experiences, and communication skills are the main drivers (Hlady-Rispal & Servantie, 2016).



## What is the venture creation process?

# ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

The social value capture dimension adopts a perspective on the organization. An organization with a social purpose captures value in financial and non-financial value, which is how it differentiates itself the most from commercial enterprises (Kullak et al., 2021). Social enterprises' focus should therefore be on activities beneficial to society, which would result in non-financial performance more than on those which add to their profits and hence result in financial performance (Hlady-Rispal & Servantie, 2016). Ultimately the **social venture** delivers value to a network within a societal context (Hlady-Rispal & Servantie, 2016), divided into human and societal sustainability (Sajjad & Shahbaz, 2020). Human sustainability involves social value shared between the organization and the employee, nurturing human capital. Societal sustainability extends this to impact the society outside of the organization, which shares the value with the organization expressing it through initiatives and activities impacting the community, also called stakeholders (Hlady-Rispal & Servantie, 2016).

Several studies (e.g., Cruzara et al., 2021; Parida et al., 2019) have investigated the **influence of digital technologies** on the value creation process in general. However, researchers have recently begun to link digital technologies and the social value creation process (Dietz et al., 2022). As digital business models play a crucial role in sustainability and social impact (Jablonski & Jablonski, 2021), recent research has investigated social value creation in sustainable digital entrepreneurship where social, environmental, and financial value are created simultaneously (Baranauskas & Raisiene, 2022). Digital technologies, including digital artifacts, platforms, and infrastructure, facilitate sustainable value creation across the value proposition, creation, delivery, and capture stages, directly influencing start-up performance (Baranauskas & Raisiene, 2022; Holzmann & Gregori, 2022; Vrontis et al., 2022).

Entrepreneurs can use digital technologies to create economic, social, and environmental value propositions, enhance socioenvironmental value creation through broader stakeholder inclusion, community building, and cocreation, and improve value capture through precise targeting and leveraging complementary value impacts (Baranauskas & Raisiene, 2022; Gregori & Holzmann, 2020; Omoleye et al., 2022). However, using digital technologies in start-ups can present challenges. In sustainable digital entrepreneurship, there is a tension between the limits imposed by social and environmental considerations when scaling the business model for multi-sided value capture and the potential for seemingly boundless scalability through digital logic (Gregori & Holzmann, 2020).



The literature on social entrepreneurship has not explored its connection with digital entrepreneurship, especially regarding the explicit use of digital technologies in sustainable and, consequently, social value proposition, creation and capture (Holzmann & Gregori, 2022).



# METHODOLOGICAL DETAILS OF THE STUDY

The goal of this study is to further the understanding of the role of digital technologies in the social value creation process of digital social start-ups. Therefore, an inductive approach to theory is chosen as it is widely used in business research (Saunders et al., 2016). The data collected is used to generate or extend a theory (Saunders et al., 2016).

In this paper, the framework of Hlady-Rispal and Servantie (2016) was used as the foundation to extend the understanding of the social value creation process with the role of digital technologies. In line with an inductive approach, a qualitative strategy was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the emergent phenomenon of digital and social entrepreneurship through the participants' views and experiences (Creswell, 2012).

## SAMPLING

Possible interview candidates were sampled using heterogeneous sampling to ensure a breadth of opinion fit for qualitative research (Myers, 2013). Therefore, the criteria for the sample were as follows:



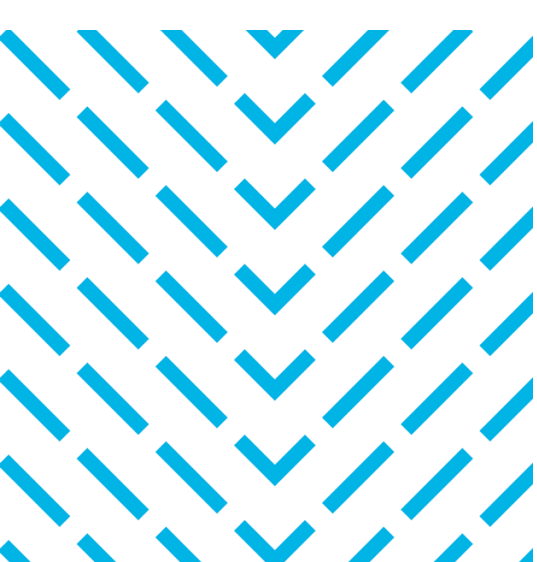
Degree of digital entrepreneurship (Hull et al., 2007) and social entrepreneurship (Perez et al., 2022) to ensure the use of digital technologies within the social value creation process.



German start-ups as both social entrepreneurship and digital entrepreneurship are gaining relevance in Germany (Kiefl et al., 2022; Metzger, 2022).



Start-ups of all experience levels because the value creation process is established when a new venture is created (Teece, 2010), meaning that regardless of the start-up's age, participants can give insights about their social value creation process.





## ● INTERVIEW PREPARATION

Preparation of a standardized interview guideline that contains predefined and formulated questions, open-ended questions and narrative prompts aimed at generating as much expert knowledge as possible.

## ● INTERVIEW CONDUCTION AND DATA COLLECTION

9 interviews were conducted with entrepreneurs from different sectors and recorded via the video conferencing platform Zoom. The interviews took place from October 22 to November 22.

## ● DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were analyzed with the data software MAXQDA. Here, an inductive approach was used to build a theory from the participants' data (Saunders et al., 2016). However, the four dimensions of the social value creation process were used as a guide for the data analysis to link the findings with the existing theory (Saunders et al., 2016). A thematic analysis was used to discover themes and patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).



October 22 – November 22



9 entrepreneurial experts



7 sectors

- ● Politics and government
- ● EduTech and children's media
- ● Sharing economy
- ● Medical services
- ● GreenTech and agriculture
- ● Urban planning
- ● Digital consultancy and medical technology

The most important results of the study are presented on the following pages. First, the role of digital technology in the social value creation process will be investigated, followed by concerns about its usage. Then, digital technology's influence on the social value proposition and social value capture will be examined.



## FINDINGS

### Insights from the study

1 - THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE SOCIAL VALUE CREATION PROCESS, THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IS SEEN AS AN AID AND ESPECIALLY HELPS CREATING ACCESSIBILITY AND RANGE.

Overall, **digital technology** was seen **as an enabler** and potential for social value creation. This trend became particularly evident in the following dimensions:

- Social value proposition (dimension 1)
- Social value generation (dimension 2)
- Social value sharing (dimension 4)

The interviewees' **focus** here was particularly on **social value sharing**, where many opportunities were seen, especially in terms of accessibility and range:



Digital technology is even partly seen as necessary and fundamental to enable social value sharing



Location- and time-independent access to the social value proposition, especially across age groups or other demographics



Exchange possibilities (with target groups, cooperation, and partners), sharing beyond borders, participation and involvement

However, respondents also cited skepticism and **distrust towards digital technology** and saw future risks, such as social value creation only being realized to full potential if digital technology was used sensibly in conjunction with other factors.



Overall, digital technology was seen as supporting processes and providing an excellent opportunity to reach more people, confirming previous findings that it can help create social value throughout the value proposition, creation, and delivery (Baranauskas & Rasiene, 2022; Holzmann & Gregori, 2022; Vrontis et al., 2022). However, the findings also support the assumptions of literature that the use of digital technology in social start-ups creates challenges and has limitations (Gregori & Holzmann, 2020). The emphasis on value sharing may be due to the fact that this dimension of "affecting the society" has also been considered a critical component of social business models in the literature (Ritala et al., 2021, p. 6). As confirmed in research, the use of digital technology in the social value creation comprises a broader stakeholder inclusion, community building, and co-creation (Baranauskas & Rasiene, 2022; Gregori & Holzmann, 2020; Omoleye et al., 2022).

## 2 - THE HIGH RELIANCE ON DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND DATA PROTECTION ARE THE MAIN CONCERNS ABOUT THE USAGE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN THE SOCIAL VALUE CREATION PROCESS.

Many interviewees repeatedly mentioned the **loss of social interaction** as one negative aspect resulting from high usage of digital technology. Regarding the dimensions of social value generation, some similarities could be worked out:



### **Underestimating the power of social interactions within the team due to high reliance on digital technology**

The convenience of meeting online promoted team distance, leading to biased conversations and misunderstood emotions. Here, digital technology can be understood as an obstructor since it hinders the interaction and exchange of the social entrepreneurs, even though such interactions were repeatedly defined as a considerable source of social value generation (Hlady-Rispal & Servantie, 2016). Thus, digital teamwork needs to be managed correctly to ensure value creation (Steininger et al., 2022).



### **Digital technology as supplementary to analog channels, not as replacement**

The fear of the analog replacement and a lack of openness were mentioned in this context, resulting in a limited possibility of reaching certain customers.



### **Data protection**

The issue of data protection, especially for highly digital start-ups is an increasing concern and needs to be balanced accordingly when gathering customer data (Steininger et al., 2022). Customers were skeptical about sharing personal data and its misuse. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic acted as an accelerator for digital technology use, more education about digital technology was mentioned to communicate data security especially for elderly people and people who are skeptical about the advantages of digital technology.



### **Loss of social contact between external stakeholders and the start-up due to the high reliance on digital technology**

Interviewees saw digital technology as an obstructor because of the loss of nuances in digital conversations regarding customers' feedback and, therefore, a loss of quality. Thus, digital social start-ups should find a balanced interplay of the analog and digital technology, while its use should not threaten personal interaction as it can negatively impact customers' perceptions (Parida et al., 2021).

### **Sample response from participants:**

**"[Digital technology] should not be the first solution, rather the second or the third."**



## FINDINGS

### Insights from the study

#### 3 - DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES ARE A PREREQUISITE TO DELIVER AND FULFILL A SOCIAL VALUE PROPOSITION FOR DIGITAL SOCIAL START-UPS.

Digital technology plays an important role in the delivery and fulfillment of the social value proposition. It appeared, that it predominantly is a prerequisite for the social value proposition as the strategic foundation of the other dimensions. Another explanation could be the target group being digital social startups. Therefore, most participants considered digital technology as an indispensable tool to effectively fulfill the proposition.

The following factors were particularly highlighted by the participants:



Digital technology saves time and costs for distributing the value proposition



It helps to generate a broader reach of people and to communicate the proposition more efficiently



New opportunities for value propositions can be created by using digital technology



Social media can act as a catalysator and digital word-of-mouth tool to have a social impact on a large scale



Digital technology offers time flexibility since data had no time restrictions, and the value proposition could always be provided



Certain obstacles like the limited technical know-how and the mistrust in technologies need to be removed



In literature, the social value proposition is described as a 'steering axle', serving as a foundation to social value generation, social value capture, and social value sharing (Hlady-Rispal & Servantie, 2016, p. 12).

Reaching new customer groups and higher contact with customers, more cost efficiencies, and the resulting new value propositions through digital technology have been known as having a positive impact on value creation (Cruzara et al., 2021; Parida et al., 2019; Piepponen et al., 2022).

When looking at potential obstacles, especially misplaced trust of customers in digital technology could pose significant threats to digital social start-ups, while customer feedback could help to establish more trust (Kraus et al., 2019).

#### 4 - FACILITATING SOCIAL VALUE CAPTURE THROUGH DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IS PROVING DIFFICULT IN PRACTICE.

Digital technology appeared to enable the scalability of the participants' offering as well as provide the possibility to create a social value proposition through crowdfunding. Still, measuring social value and finding a basis for quantifying the financial aspect of it may prove difficult. For example, some used customer satisfaction surveys or other measurable scales to capture their non-financial social value. In this way, they measured their concrete social value to their customers.



For the future, many digital social start-ups see digital technology as a **potential facilitator for value capturing** and, e.g. would like to be able to capture the data more quickly and at shorter notice.

However, capturing social value through digital technology in the future is also viewed with **skepticism**. Some start-ups saw a danger in defining themselves solely in financial terms, misusing these numbers as a PR measure or comparing themselves too much, e.g., with competitors – and that through the paradoxical desire to measure social value financially, the **social component might get lost**.



In literature, digital technology is described as an aid to capture social value, especially in supporting the scalability and spilling of the socioenvironmental value – e.g., via platforms or crowdfunding services (Gregori & Holzmann, 2020). It also helps to support the combination of capturing socio-environmental and economic values (p. 5). However, the digital social start-ups that participated in this study did not confirm this statement. Still, the point of using customer satisfaction to capture non-financial social value can also be found in Gregori & Holzmann as “facilitating scalability” through digital technology (2020, p.6).

#### Sample response from participants:

“[...] without these digital technologies, we would not be able to make the whole thing possible.”





## OUTLOOK

### Summary and implications of the study

# A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE

The **use of digital technology** has appeared as a **positive influence in the social value creation process** of digital social start-ups and is conducive to social value. Still, digital technology functions as a tool and interacts with other factors in the social value creation process.

Below, the study's main conclusions are summarized.

1. Digital technologies are an aid for **increasing efficiency and practicability** in social value generation and help **create accessibility** to the social value proposition as well as range in terms of social value sharing.
2. The **main concerns** about digital technology are **data protection** and high **reliance** on it.
3. Digital technologies are a **prerequisite** to deliver and fulfil a **social value proposition** for digital social start-ups.
4. Digital technology **facilitates social value capture**, but it is difficult in practice since social value is **hard to measure** financially.



The suggested propositions can be applied for research regarding other types of value creation (e.g., economic, environmental) and help bridge the gap between digital entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship research.



Entrepreneurs can use these findings to better understand how the use of digital technology affects their own social value creation process. For this, the framework on said process must be communicated and taught better to foster understanding on how social value is created.



Two of the social SDGs were not included in this study's sample (1 and 5). Future research should aim to find start-ups with these goals as they might offer more insights. Further, an unclear understanding of social value and the social value creation process of the digital social start-ups was identified, showing the need for clear definitions in further studies.



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