Benefits and Challenges Associated with Using Online Communities by Social Enterprises: A Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Interviews

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ABSTRACT
Social Enterprises (SEs) have gained a considerable amount of attention during last decade in entrepreneurship sector. This paper aims to investigate the benefits and challenges associated with the use of online communities (OCs) by actors in SE sector for value co-creation. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with actors derived primarily from 4 Facebook OCs dedicated for SEs. Results demonstrate that the benefits of using OCs include increased accessibility, time and cost effectiveness, increased responsiveness, accessing to a network of connections, and resource exchange opportunities. However, the challenges include time-consuming, budget, lack of capacity, inadequate moderation, fragmentation of efforts, and inactivity.

KEYWORDS
Social enterprise; online communities; value co-creation; qualitative; thematic analysis; interview; Facebook

Introduction
Social enterprises (SEs) are cause-driven organisations that exist between traditional non-profit and for-profit businesses generating income from innovative commercial activities in order to reinvest the majority of their income into achieving a social, economic, cultural, or environmental goal (Alter 2007; Defourny and Nyssens 2010; Di Domenico, Tracey, and Haugh 2009; Kay, Roy, and Donaldson 2016; Wry and York 2017). Seeking to achieve their objectives and due to their hybrid structure, SEs encounter a number of distinct challenges. The fundamental premise of this research is that collaboration and partnerships between different actors in the ecosystem of SEs supported by online communities can lead to value co-creation, which enables SEs to address their challenges.

Previous research has provided various challenges for SEs. To begin with, a major concern of SEs is developing a business model that enables them to achieve financial performance whilst not compromising the intended social and/or environmental aims of the enterprise (Agostinelli 2010; Jay 2013; Puspadewi et al. 2019). Moreover, an underdeveloped ecosystem for SE support and scaling can lead to other challenges for SEs including restrictive public policy and regulation, limited public awareness and
reach, difficulties with meeting diverse stakeholder expectations, and measuring their social impact (Lee and Nowell 2015; Barraket, Mason, and Blain 2016). These challenges are further exacerbated by increased governmental reform on funding opportunities (e.g., grants) and growing pressures on Not-for-Profit Organisations and SEs to “diversify their income sources” (Barraket and Collyer 2010, 11). This has resulted in the need to bridge multiple stakeholders acting within the ecosystem of SEs, in an attempt to facilitate more effectively for the interactions and partnerships necessary to both generate finances and procure the resources necessary to accomplish their mission (Henry 2015). In addition, another challenge for SEs is human resource management as they rely on a hybrid workforce ranging from skilled and unskilled employees through to volunteers who provide their services free of charge (Bloice and Burnett 2016; Bornstein 2007). Organisational governance was also identified as a factor that either significantly enables or constrains social enterprise development (Mason, Kirkbride, and Bryde 2007; Smith and Woods 2015; Spear, Cornforth, and Aiken 2009). Furthermore, while small SEs often find acquiring financial and human resources as their major challenge, larger SEs usually are constrained by the management of these financial and human resources (Defourny and Nyssens 2017).

In order to cope with their challenges, it is crucial for SEs to be innovative with their product and service offerings, and create new partnerships with different external organisations (Shaw and Carter 2007). Creating partnerships and networks with different actors can enable SEs to harness and integrate different types of resources, such as financial (e.g., grants and discounts), human resources (e.g., volunteers and employees), information and knowledge, as well as physical resources (e.g., office space and equipment) (Ge, Xu, and Pellegrini 2019; Grover and Kohli 2012; Kazadi, Lievens, and Mahr 2016; Luisa and Magdalena 2017; Shaw and Carter 2007). Previous literature has explored the benefits of cross-sector partnership arrangements for SEs with different actors in their sector including but not limited to increased opportunity for collaborative advantage, greater alignment of objectives, improved service optimisation and delivery, and increased funding opportunities (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2011; Henry 2015). In addition, the fulfilment of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, as well as enhanced positive brand awareness by meeting consumers’ expectations of ethical behaviours (Sinthupundaja, Kohda, and Chiadamrong 2019) have been mentioned as the other benefits of partnerships with SEs for For-Profit-organisations (Henry 2015).

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is recognised as a tool to facilitate cross-sector partnerships and interactions among multiple actors (Purvis and Purvis 2012). Furthermore, ICT can enable organisations to shift from traditionally physical business landscapes to digitised collaboration platforms and create networks including multiple actors (Nambisan 2009). Indeed, ICT is no longer regarded solely as a repository for knowledge management, but also as an enabling tool for online collaboration in various forms and formats (Shamsuzzoha et al. 2016; Sharratt and Usoro 2003). As a result, this has led to the development of various online communities (OCs) and platforms within the social enterprise sector to enable actors to build collaborative cross-sector networks where they can (i) integrate resources, (ii) share knowledge, information, and best practices, (iii) gain competitive advantage, (iv) innovate
their product and service offerings via the crowdsourcing of ideas, and (v) expand their business opportunities onto a larger stage with minimal financial investment (Roser, DeFillippi, and Sams 2013; Shamsuzzoha et al. 2016). These interactions between actors in the networks and their partnerships can lead to value co-creation in different aspects including: “co-produced, co-manufactured, co-developed, co-designed, co-serviced and/or co-processed” (Romero and Molina 2011, 448).

Value co-creation is defined as gaining value or benefit from the collaborative integration of resources through activities and interactions among multiple actors in a network (Vargo, Maglio, and Akaka 2008). OCs can enable the integration of knowledge, information, and skills by facilitating partnerships and communication among different actors in the networks (Grover and Kohli 2012; Nambisan 2009; Shamsuzzoha et al. 2016). Moreover, utilising OCs can provide SEs and other actors in the sector with a range of benefits such as more effective financial spending through the transfer of knowledge and best practices, sharing expertise and resources (Hansen and Nohria 2004), network effects, ability to access latent resources, crowdsourcing, collaborative consumption, and enhanced capabilities via diversity of actors (Garrett, Straker, and Wrigley 2017). For instance, while customers benefit from enhanced personalisation and value of a product or service as a result of the co-creation process, businesses gain competitive advantage by turning “just-in-time knowledge” into “just-in-time learning” for their organisation, thereby also enhancing the development of future products and the business’ brand perception (Roser, DeFillippi, and Sams 2013). Consequently, an increasing number of actors within the business landscape are adopting strategies such as the use of OCs enabling them to collaboratively co-create value and mitigate challenges with other actors.

Although previous researchers have investigated the role of OCs as a valuable tool for value co-creation through interactions among actors, it is stated that using OCs can cause new challenges for organisations (Abedin and Bidar 2019; Järvi, Kähkönen, and Torvinen 2018; Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres 2010; Zhang et al. 2018). To begin with, Kazadi, Lievens, and Mahr (2016, 525) argue that when different stakeholders participate in co-creation process, there might arise numerous challenges in an organisation including: “potential divergent goals and interests, communication difficulties, distrust among stakeholders, or conflict over value appropriation”.

This study aims to respond to call for more research on understanding the role of multiple actors in value co-creation in different contexts (Kleinaltenkamp et al. 2012; Reypens, Lievens, and Blazevic 2016). In particular, Reypens, Lievens, and Blazevic (2016) state that there is a need to study how different types of resources (here online communities) can support value co-creation among multiple actors. Therefore, in order to understand the benefits and challenges associated with the use of online communities by different actors within the SEs context, the authors aim to answer the main research question of this study which is “What are the benefits and challenges for social enterprises associated with using online communities for value co-creation?”

In the following sections, the authors will firstly present the relevant literature followed by theoretical approach used in this study. Second, the methods used will be described followed by presenting our results. Third, the findings and contributions to
both research and practice will be discussed. Finally, the suggestions for future studies will be provided.

**Literature review**

**The ecosystem of social enterprises**

Past research on mapping the ecosystem of SEs around the world has led to the identification of several key internal and external stakeholders including other active SEs, support agencies, governments, public sector, For-Profit organisations, Non-Profit organisations, employees, volunteers, customers, beneficiaries (Agostinelli 2010; Alter 2007; Barraket et al. 2017; Barraket and Collyer 2010; Defourny and Nyssens 2017; Grant 2017; Hazenberg et al. 2016; Hwang et al. 2017; Mirić and Krstić 2017; Spear, Cornforth, and Aiken 2009). It should be noted that despite definitional differences, the terms ‘actor’, ‘partner’, and ‘stakeholder’ will be considered synonymous and used interchangeably within this paper to denote an individual or entity acting within the ecosystem of SEs (Doolin and Lowe 2002).

**Partnerships & collaboration**

In today’s dynamic business and social environment, SEs like other organisations rely on leveraging the assets of cross-sector partnerships with other actors in their ecosystem to operate effectively and sustainably (Ge, Xu, and Pellegrini 2019; Intindola et al. 2019; Luisa and Magdalena 2017). According to Kazadi, Lievens, and Mahr (2016), each actor in the ecosystem of organisations has their own unique resources and capabilities, knowledge, information, and skills to name a few, which can be leveraged during value co-creation process. In order to successfully fulfil their chosen mission whilst maintaining financial sustainability, SEs routinely collaborate with multiple actors in an effort to co-create social value for mutual benefit by integrating various resources and capabilities (Domegan et al. 2013). Creating these partnerships and collaborations with other actors are also because of the fact that, in recent years, governments across the world have focussed on encouraging non-profit organisations and SEs to shift away from a reliance on subsidies and donations to generate income through trading goods and services (Di Domenico, Tracey, and Haugh 2009). This global government legislative reform on funding has revealed a greater need for effective and strategic collaboration within the social sector in both traditional private-public partnerships (PPPs) and multi-party collaborations with all stakeholders involved in the networks (Tossavainen 2013). The cross-sector partnerships create unique opportunities for the development of a cooperative network of “like-minded, long-term partners” in which SEs can cooperate, collaborate, and share their workload and resources (Wei-Skillern and Marciano 2008).

In addition, For-Profit-Organisations (FPOs) have recently been placed under increasing pressure to be socially responsible, specifically with regards to increased regulation from governments and rising expectations of ethical consciousness of society (Barraket, Mason, and Blain 2016). Consequently, FPOs have started creating cross-sector collaborative social partnerships with SEs to meet the increasing expectations
from the society regarding ethical consciousness and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives by leveraging the resources held by SEs (Chedli 2016; Di Domenico, Tracey, and Haugh 2009). Likewise, in recent decades, various governments have moved towards encouraging comprehensive public-sector reform to reduce community reliance on funding and government programmes (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2011). Their primary motivation for SE partnerships is the establishment of public services with more accessibility and responsibility to the public, and to a lesser extent, the improvement of financial allocation and expenditure, as well as the enhanced effectiveness and quality of government programmes and actions (Jenei et al. 2005). These cross-sector partnerships can provide all the actors involved with various benefits including (a) cost savings through the transfer of knowledge and best practices; (b) better decision making as a result of advice obtained from consultants and other colleagues within the network; (c) increased revenue through the sharing of expertise and resources; (d) innovation through the combination and cross-pollination of ideas; and (e) enhanced capacity for collective action (Hansen and Nohria 2004; Smith and Woods 2015). This concept of hybrid, multi-party partnerships is supported by Gummesson (2008) arguing that value in service is not created just by the supplier and the customer. Similarly. It is stated that value is co-created through a “network of activities involving a host of stakeholders” (Tossavainen 2013, 175). Moreover, Tossavainen (2013, 173) proposes that engaging stakeholders into collaborative joint activities, such as focus groups or management decisions, will increase the “diversification in the broadness of information” and “the amount and quality of the development suggestions”, particularly when these stakeholders are from various stakeholder groups, differing levels of hierarchy, and dissimilar positions. However, these cross-sector partnerships need to be supported by online technologies as they allow their members to participate in collaborative networks (in a cost-effective and widespread way) to share knowledge, integrate resources, support each other, increase trust, and create an identity to the community (Romero and Molina 2011). It is stated that online communities are systems resource integrators by providing technological platforms to support participation of multiple actors in partnerships creation and resource integration process (Singaraju et al. 2016).

**SEs and online communities**

Collaborative networks are crucial in enabling actors to innovate their product and service offerings, gain access to knowledge and resources, and expand their business opportunities onto a much larger stage with minimal financial investment (Shamsuzzoha et al. 2016). ICT, OCs in particular, can play a key role in both enabling cross-sector partnerships and mitigating existing challenges within the SE sector to shift from traditionally physical business landscapes to digitised collaboration platforms and networks (Nambisan 2009). Since the emergence of OCs, as an information and communication technology, they have gained a considerable amount of attention as a valuable source of collaboration and creating cross-sector partnerships in different contexts (Füller et al. 2009; Nambisan 2010). Although during the last years, SEs have used ICTs like OCs for different purposes such as marketing (Mitchell, Madill, and
Chreim 2015), Scaling up (Braud and Schwittay 2016), human and community development (Gurstein, O’Neill, and Petersen 2009), and communication amongst social enterprise employees (Keane et al. 2017), scant research is available on the role of OCs in creating cross-sector partnerships. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the role of OCs as the facilitator of building collaborative cross-sector networks and partnerships within the social enterprise context (Abedin and Bidar 2019; Luisa and Magdalena 2017) to enable actors share resources, knowledge, and best practices; gain competitive advantage; innovate their product and service offerings via the crowdsourcing of ideas, and expand their business opportunities onto a larger stage with minimal financial investment (Napathorn 2018; Roser, DeFillippi, and Sams 2013; Shamsuzzoha et al. 2016). Other potentials afforded via increased connectivity with co-creators include SE actors’ ability to access latent resources, network effects, crowdsourcing, collaborative consumption, and enhanced capabilities via diversity (Garrett, Straker, and Wrigley 2017).

Theoretical approach

In this research, a theoretical perspective based on Service-Dominant Logic and Social Capital theory has been employed. It is stated that the interactions between actors in networks, and their partnerships can lead to value co-creation in different aspects (Romero and Molina 2011). The authors aim to study the concept of value co-creation and its advantageous role within the social enterprise context as Eletxigerra, Barrutia, and Echebarria (2018) argue that it is crucial to investigate the potential opportunities and consequences of value co-creation in different contexts.

Service-Dominant (S-D) logic is a meta-theoretical framework developed by Vargo and Lusch (2004) which defines value creation through the exchange of services amongst multiple actors in a network. S-D logic stems from a move away from goods dominant logic (G-D logic) – which has governed our economic practices for centuries and defines “value” as the exchange of “goods” or tangible products – to a focus on the provision of services or intangible resources, networked relationships, and the co-creation of value (Vargo and Lusch 2004, 1). In other word, while traditional Goods-Dominant (G-D) logic maintains that the purpose of economic exchange is to manufacture and distribute tangible products to be sold, an S-D approach explains that all exchange is based on service, and consequently, knowledge and skills are key resources to achieve competitive advantage (Vargo and Lusch 2004). Similarly, as the modified S-D logic fundamental premise (FP9) explains: ‘All social and economic actors are resource integrators’, meaning that interaction between multiple actors in the networks is an essential part of value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch 2008, 7). Therefore, S-D logic perspective was applied to investigate how creating networks with different actors and interactions with them can lead to value co-creation for SEs and other involved actors.

Social capital theory is based on the fact that different resources can be obtained through the networks of social relationships among various actors (Coleman 1988). As Warren, Sulaiman, and Jaafar (2015) argue, there is a lack of agreement whether or not using online communities can create or destroy social capital. In addition, there is
a need to explore the important factors impacting on the online participatory behaviour of the actors (Chiu, Hsu, and Wang 2006). In addition, it is stated that social capital theory can contribute to entrepreneurship research as it enables the researchers to study the processes and outcomes of social interactions between actors at multiple levels of analysis in different contexts (Gedajlovic et al. 2013).

**Methods**

In order to answer the research question, a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews was used as it enables us to explore the phenomenon under study in which scant research is available (Bryman 2016; Creswell and Creswell 2017). In particular, semi-structured interviews provide us with the opportunity to study the knowledge, experiences, and needs of actors who use online communities dedicated for social enterprise to understand the benefits and challenges associated with using online communities, as well as examining various resources that can be accessed and exchanged through interactions among actors (Bryman 2016; Gill et al. 2008; Scheuerle and Schmitz 2016). A semi-structured interviews was used because Drever (1995) explains this type of interviewing is suitable when the research is small-scale and there is a need for a flexible method allowing the participants to express whatever they want. Moreover, the “semi-structured format” can enable the researchers to be open to relevant unanticipated lines of conversation generated through the discussion whilst also being guided by research themes and indicative questions formulated in advance (Drever 1995).

**Data collection**

The process of data collection occurred through a series of 9 semi-structured qualitative interviews with actors in SEs sector who use dedicated online communities for SEs to engage in some form of mutual value exchange (e.g., beyond “collaboration” or “interaction” to substantive value being co-created). The interviews were conducted over 4 months (June 2018–November 2018) in English via phone, Skype, or in a face-to-face interview setting for approximately 60 min and were recorded digitally, transcribed and then analysed through a thematic analysis approach and by using NVivo 12 with an inductive coding approach (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013; Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2007).

**Participants**

The participants were drawn: (a) from online communities dedicated for SEs, social entrepreneurs, and/or non-profit-organisations; and (b) from an offline Australian-based social enterprise ecosystem, whereby participants expressed their use of online communities in the SE space. The inclusion criteria for the participants of this study are as follows:

1. Must have some sort of association with social enterprises (i.e., an actor within the social enterprises’ ecosystem)
(2) Must have an active role within an online community for social enterprise (e.g., shares insights and resources, responds to questions from other members, participates in activities). It should be noted that these communities must display visible and recurring activity and value exchange between members within the last 3 months (Koh et al. 2007; Malinen 2015).

This study has been conducted in Australia, however, the inclusion of participants is not restricted to Australia as the nature of online communities is extremely interconnected and not restricted by geographic bounds (Äkkinen 2005; Armstrong and Hagel 2000; Greco and Cresta 2016; Romero and Molina 2011). Therefore, participants for this study were also sourced from other countries only if they meet the inclusion criteria outlined above. Similarly, it should also be noted that the use of ‘active’ in criterion 3 is used very liberally, as there is not an agreement on distinguishing active from passive members in online communities (e.g., Chen 2004; Ganley, Moser, and Groenewegen 2012; Golder and Donath 2004; Neelen and Fetter 2010) and many existing online communities dedicated for social enterprises do not showcase the level of interaction commonly associated with active members of communities of practice. In addition, due to the fact that triangulation of data sources plays an important role in qualitative research to enable researchers to investigate areas of agreement and disagreement across various groups (Carter et al. 2014; Robertson et al. 2018), different actors were recruited (i.e., Founders/CEOs, Educators, Employees, and Consultants) to be able to study the benefits and challenges associated with using online communities from different perspectives. Table 1 outlines the participants included in this study in terms of their location and role in the ecosystem of SEs.

Analysis

Thematic analysis, as an analytical technique to identify, analysis and report the themes and patterns was carried out to analyse the interview data (Boyatzis 1998; Braun and Clarke 2006). It was chosen as it enables the identification of recurring patterns within the qualitative data collected as part of this study. The authors followed the guideline provided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) as a method of conducting thematic analysis namely, familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. Table 2 represents the detailed steps that were followed in this study to conduct the thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006). Nvivo 12, as a qualitative data analysis tool, was employed “to extract adequate meaning from the underlying data”

| ID | Location | Role in the ecosystem of SEs |
|----|----------|-----------------------------|
| P1 | USA      | Founder/CEO                 |
| P2 | IND      | Employee                    |
| P3 | PAK      | Educator                    |
| P4 | GBR      | Founder/CEO                 |
| P5 | AUS      | Founder/CEO                 |
| P6 | AUS      | Founder/CEO                 |
| P7 | AUS      | Consultant                  |
| P8 | AUS      | Founder/CEO                 |
| P9 | AUS      | Founder/CEO                 |
It enabled us to code textual data, search for combinations of words, strings and patterns through its ‘Query’ functions (Bandara, Miskon, and Fielt 2011). Having conducted the coding process by the first authors, any disagreement was resolved through meetings in each step of the process before using the codes for the final assessment. Krippendorff’s alpha (Krippendorff 2004) was used as a statistical measure of reliability in the thematic analysis, to measure the reliability of agreement regarding the coding of data, which resulted in 0.89 indicating a high reliability of agreement.

The second author transcribed each of the qualitative interviews and then the transcriptions were independently reviewed and validated by other authors (phase 1), observing the diversity in responses between participants with differing roles in both the ecosystem of SEs and through their online interactions. There were 19 initial codes established in the generating initial codes (phase 2), with initial searches for themes (phase 3) noting connection to peers and information gain as core benefits of using OCs, whilst expectation and inactivity emerged as notable challenges. Table 3 depicts the initial themes and the initial codes related to each theme.

Having reviewed the initial themes (phase 4), the authors observed a clear distinction between the two different perspectives in the themes and defined them as actors-centric and platform-centric. While the former expresses the benefits and challenges related to the peer-to-peer connection between the users of OCs, the latter presents the benefits and associated with using OCs as a platform for creating cross-sector partnerships. In addition, as Table 4 depicts, all the identified benefits and challenges are presented.

| Phase | Summary | Description |
|-------|---------|-------------|
| 1     | Familiarizing yourself with your data | Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas. |
| 2     | Generating initial codes | Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code. |
| 3     | Searching for themes | Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. |
| 4     | Reviewing themes | Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis. |
| 5     | Defining and naming Themes | Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme. |
| 6     | Producing the report | The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis. |
challenges were categorised into two groups, however, after reviewing the initial themes, the authors distinguished the benefits and challenges related to either actors or platforms. Finally, themes were named and defined (phase 5) based on their perspectives, obtaining exemplifying extracts from the data set.

Results

As a result of the thematic analysis, two main themes namely, platform-centric and actors-centric, were identified presenting key benefits and challenges associated with using online communities by actors in the ecosystem of SEs. The benefits of using OCs will be presented followed by a discussion on the challenges associated with using OCs based on both actors-centric and platform-centric perspectives.

Benefits

The participants in this study expressed certain benefits of using OCs for value co-creation that were categorised into the actors-centric and platform-centric perspectives. While actors-centric benefits indicate that OCs can provide the actors with the opportunity to engage in connection, interaction, and resource exchange with real-world social actors, platform-centric benefits can facilitate value co-creation process by providing more accessibility to always online communities such as Facebook Groups, cost and time effectiveness, and more responsiveness of OCs compared to the traditional methods.

Actors-centric benefits

Several sub-themes established throughout thematic analysis were identified as relating to the actors (e.g., users) utilising the OCs dedicated to SEs. These sub-themes outline various benefits associated with using OCs for actors within the ecosystem of SEs with respect to the capabilities enabled by the OCs utilised.
Connection. The findings demonstrated actionable connections was consistently among mentioned themes by the actors as a key benefit enabling actors to connect and interact with like-minded members in OCs. For instance, members who were more experienced within the social enterprise and non-profit sector would often offer pro-bono services (professional work undertaken voluntarily and without payment) to less-experienced members of OCs. As an example, P1 would sporadically post opportunities within the OC for members to receive help “for free on one-hour calls”. Likewise, participants (P3 and P7) stated that that the myriad of diverse connections and needs facilitated by their membership in these communities resulted in the building of meaningful relationships with other members. P2 mentioned a key benefit of OCs as a way to build relationships “quickly and in a fun way with other like-minded people”, considering the informative value of these connections to be “just as good as a Google search for information”. In addition, these communities enable initial connections with peers and potential clients, thereby facilitating for a network of connections of “other actors in the space” (P7), with whom members can become colleagues, friends, and referral pathways. Similarly, the fact that OCs can facilitate network connections among a diverse ranges of new like-minded people was frequently cited as a key benefit to their use in achieving mutual value co-creation. For instance, P5 attributed a great benefit of OCs as their “pulling in the kinds of people” who share challenges and providing them “a space to talk about it in and collaborate”. Correspondingly, participants (P1 and P5) attributed OCs’ selective membership criteria as a key benefit, as it enables the filtering out of people and information that is irrelevant or damaging to the community.

Exchange. Exchange of resources, information and knowledge to occur at multiple levels, depending on members’ experiences and level of expertise within the sector, was one of the most mentioned themes by participants. For example, P4 expressed value beyond the interaction and exchange of information with anyone in these communities, as they enable open knowledgeable discussion between “like-minded people who are operating at a similar level and have a similar level of expertise”. Similarly, P8 noted the benefit of using OCs for SEs in the exchange of “ideas, inspiration, and knowledge” with others within the sector that are able to be adapted and replicated in members’ own unique contexts. In fact, this notion of sharable value exchange as a key benefit of membership within OCs frequently emerged within the qualitative interviews – P1, P2, P5, P7, P8, and P9. In the context of exchange, many participants noted the value of webinar-type informational videos that provide “exposure” (P7) to what is occurring within the ecosystem of SEs.

Platform-centric benefits
In addition to the identified sub-themes relating to the actors-centric perspective, several sub-themes were identified relating to the platform-centric perspective (e.g., Facebook). These sub-themes outline the benefit associated with using OCs by actors within the ecosystem of SEs with respect to the capabilities enabled by the OCs utilised.

Accessibility. The accessibility inherent within OCs was frequently expressed as a major benefit to members, both in terms of easy access to like-minded social networks and non-perishable resources, regardless of geographic location. To begin with, when
asked about the perceived benefits of their involvement in these communities, P9 attributed it to their access to “more connections very quickly and easily”. Likewise, a major benefit provided by OCs was the access to various resources (human resources, knowledge or information) regardless of their geographic location. Moreover, P6 referred to OCs as an “important tool” in collaborating with other actors regardless of location as they enable resources to always be available and, therefore, consumed at the members’ convenience – an opinion similarly maintained by P4, who values the flexible and asynchronously accessible nature of OCs.

Time Saving. The next identified benefit provided by OCs relates to “Time” which can enable members to gain a greater reach “in terms of interacting with more like-minded people” (P4) in comparison with offline interactions. In this sense, the use of OCs, compared to traditionally offline and often localised events dedicated to SEs, enables service delivery to be “much more fast and effective” (P8). For example, when asked about the perceived benefits of their use of OCs, P8 noted “time saving” nature of OCs as a key catalyst in maximising their impact, highlighting the avoidance of travelling to meet with potential partners only to find “they are not interested, and we have wasted our time where we could have been doing something more”.

Cost Effectiveness. The other most commonly used theme specified the cost effectiveness of OCs as a major platform-centric benefit. For instance, P2 stated that OCs allow the delivery of rapid “light touch support”, enabling more effective interactions meaning that “it really costs nothing except time”. From a more practical standpoint, participants mentioned the value of OCs and collaboration platforms in the ability to “share a tone of information and a tone of knowledge at a really low cost” (P5). In addition, agreement existed among participants in the role of OCs in leveraging support “via distance” (P9 and P3) – meaning that “without having to do it offline and pay for transport, accommodation and so on”.

Responsiveness. The results demonstrated that a key benefit of using OCs to support value co-creation is their facilitation for a greater agility and flexibility compared to offline environments. To be exact, participants argue that OCs can enable responsive interactions between members. As an illustration, when asked to expand further on the perceived value of the responsiveness of OCs, P9 noted that they were able to send through “a little quick video” they had put together to assist members who were unsure about different situations you seeking for information.

Challenges

Although the results demonstrated that using OCs by actors in the ecosystem of SEs can provide various benefits, participants were found to face certain challenges when they use OCs for value co-creation. Similar to the identified benefits, the challenges have been categorised based on actors-centric and platform-centric perspectives. Notably, while the former outlines the challenges encountered by users when using OCs, such as many very small communities leading to SE actors’ fragmentation of effort across multiple oftentimes niche and inactive groups, the latter notes the platform’s restrictive freemium service offerings and communicative feature capabilities as key challenges to using OCs by actors.
Actors-centric challenges

Our findings indicate that when actors use OCs in the ecosystem of SEs, they face various challenges which have been categorised as sub-themes relating to the actors-centric perspective.

Inactivity. The results outline that the inactivity of members within OCs dedicated for SEs was the most common mentioned theme by participants as a major inhibitor in achieving mutual value exchange and co-creation. P2 noted that “a Facebook group might have 20,000 members, but not many of them are active”. Likewise, P4 expressed a similar phenomenon of inactivity within large communities, stating whilst a community may have 30,000 members, they do not “see quality conversation and support” occurring in the same way it does with smaller, close-knit groups. Many participants (P1, P2, P4, P7) mentioned joining and then soon leaving several communities as a result of their relative inactivity.

Fragmentation of Effort. There is an abundance of OCs dedicated for SEs on Facebook, many of which have small membership counts (e.g., less than 200 members), and often diverse aims and objectives. Despite this plethora of online community offerings, many are relatively inactive and have not reached critical mass to be of value to members. This large and fragmented pool of online communities leads interested members to “sit on the periphery of a lot of communities” (P9) relating to their interests, forcing members to be discerning with which communities they focus their efforts and activity in. Consequently, despite increasing the community’s outwardly facing membership count, it does not encourage active involvement within them. Accordingly, this results in members jumping “back out” (P1) of many communities, further exacerbating the problem of having too many underdeveloped and inactive OCs.

Inadequate Moderation. The other mentioned challenge by the participants was that without proper moderation strategies, OCs can become a breeding ground for damaging comments, such as “negative publicity” (P2), “untruthful reviews” (P6), or “harassment or trolling” (P7). Similarly, without effective moderation efforts on the part of administrators, communities often become “full of information and self-promotion” (P1) rather than “quality and engaging content” (P4), thereby losing the “community” aspect that provides so much value. Likewise, ineffective moderation in an online context can lead to information overload or “spam” (P4), resulting in members being unable to validate information and, therefore, feeling uncertainty in its legitimacy.

Platform-centric challenges

In previous section, the challenges that actors face when they use OCs for value co-creation were discussed. However, there are also challenges relating to nature of using OCs including time-consuming, budget and capability of using OCs.

Time-Consuming. Participants frequently attributed time-consuming process of interacting online as a major challenge in cultivating a valuable social network wherein mutual value exchange can occur. To illustrate it, P4, who is also a moderator of a small online community dedicated for social entrepreneurs, noted that the necessity to “play by Facebook’s rules” is the core challenge in building an online community for value co-creation in this space as they need to spend much time to meet the requirements indicated by Facebook to be able to publish their contents. Furthermore,
P3 argued that they need to continually invest time into posting contents with high quality to encourage the members of the OCs to engage. Likewise, P4 and P3 also explained that there is the need to engage in public Facebook Live videos (a live video recording feature on the platform) to effectively engage the community’s audiences. Moreover, Facebook publicly advertises members’ last activity date, which can force members to feel like they need to “respond at the earliest time possible”, despite any “time lag or time differences” (P2).

**Capacity.** The results of our thematic analysis shows that a core mentioned challenge of OCs in the ecosystem of SEs is the lack of their capacity to facilitate sustainable on-going interactions. That is, whereas a key benefit of OCs is providing initial connections between members, a challenge emerges in moving beyond initial connections to an actionable environment where actors can finalise value exchange. P2 highlighted it as the necessity to also “build an offline setting” in order to facilitate the end-to-end journey of value exchange. To illustrate it, P4 explains that online platforms provide a limited set of tools with regards to enabling more advanced nature of exchange (e.g., Facebook does not facilitate for shared document storage and real-time editing, thus forcing members in a partnership arrangement to utilise other platforms, such as Google Docs, to complete the collaboration). In addition, it is stated by the participants that some online platforms limit the efficacy and reach of members’ posts depending on their content and investment. This challenge was commonly referred to “the algorithm” (P1, P2, P4, P8, P9), denoting the platform’s internal process for displaying member content to others within the community.

**Budget.** The last challenge stated by the participants that should be taken into account is budget. For instance, (P2 and P4) mentioned marketing budget as a major inhibitor to spread their content to more audiences because “there is a limitation on how many audiences you can reach without spending money” (e.g., Facebook advertisements). Consequently, people who may be interested in their services or opportunities will not know it existed.

**Discussion and contributions**

Based on the thematic analysis of qualitative interviews, the results of this study showed that the benefits and challenges associated with using OCs by actors in the ecosystem of SEs can be classified as actors-centric and platform-centric. In terms of actors-centric benefits, actionable connections with other like-minded actors as well as resource exchange have been identified as the main benefits. It is in line with the argument that connection and interactions with other actors in the networks can enable the members of the networks to adopt best practices and successful models (Tossavainen 2013), and also to increase their growth and sustainability (Ge, Xu, and Pellegrini 2019). It also leads to resource exchange, which is crucial for SEs as they typically rely on multiple and diverse actors to co-create value to gain competitive advantages in their dynamic and complex ecosystem (Barrett, Oborn, and Orlikowski 2016). In terms of platform-centric benefits, the results of this study demonstrate that increased accessibility, time saving, cost effectiveness, and increased responsiveness are the key benefits perceived by the actors when they use OCs in the ecosystem of SEs.
for value co-creation. This finding is in line with the results of the extant literature stating that OCs can enable the members to access knowledge, information, to integrate resources, and interact with like-minded people (Romero and Molina 2011) in a fast and cost-effective way regardless of their geographic location (Eggert et al. 2018; Gebauer, Füller, and Pezzei 2013). Figure 1 represents the benefits associated with using OCs for value co-creation by actors in the ecosystem of SEs from both actors-centric and platform-centric perspectives.

However, the authors further found that actors face different challenges when they use OCs in the ecosystem of SEs. To begin with the actors-centric challenges, inactivity of members within OCs dedicated for SEs is a common challenge for actors in the ecosystem of SEs similar to the argument provided by previous studies on inactive participants (lurkers) who read the content and take advantage of the benefits in OCs while they do not necessarily contribute to the community in terms of content (Koh et al. 2007; Malinen 2015; Preece, Nonnecke, and Andrews 2004). In addition, fragmentation of effort and inadequate moderation were found as another actors-centric challenges in this study. Fragmentation of effort happens because of insufficient activity and membership counts within OCs, which can lead to leaving OCs or keeping OCs inactive. Although it is stated that even highly successful OCs suffer from challenges of limited contribution and activity of their members (Kraut and Resnick 2012), this challenge is more common in small OCs with limited members. Furthermore, inadequate moderation in OCs can result in negative publicity, untruthful reviews, harassment or trolling, low-quality information, and information overload. The mentioned issues have been presented by extant literature as the causes of value co-destruction in OCs (Frau, Cabiddu, and Muscas 2018; Järvi, Kähkönen, and Torvinen 2018; Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres 2010; Vafeas, Hughes, and Hilton 2016). In addition to these challenges, our findings show that time-consuming, lack of capacity, and budget are three mentioned platform-centric challenges by participants in this study. The results of this study substantiate the arguments provided by previous research on the fact that time plays a
key role in participation and engagement of users in OCs, meaning that if the users find the action time-consuming or if they do not have sufficient time to spend on the action, it is unlikely to participate in OCs (Hung, Sirakaya-Turk, and Ingram 2011; Leung and Bai 2013; Turner and Pennington 2015). In addition, although it is stated that since the emergence of OCs, they have gained a considerable amount of attention as a valuable source of value co-creation (Füller et al. 2009; Nambisan 2010), our findings indicate that in some cases, OCs lack the capacity to facilitate sustainable ongoing interactions. Moreover, the results of this study in terms of identifying budget as the other challenge of using OCs by actors is in line with previous literature stating that accessing to financial resources can be a challenge for members for using OCs (Hung, Sirakaya-Turk, and Ingram 2011; Turner and Pennington 2015; Wiggins 2004). Figure 2 demonstrates the challenges associated with using OCs for value co-creation in the ecosystem of SEs from both actors-centric and platform-centric perspectives.

Figure 2. Challenges of using online communities for value co-creation.

There is an academic consensus on the “unsatisfactory” state of research on social enterprise and entrepreneurship (Barraket and Collyer 2010; Defourny 2001; Howaldt, Kaletka, and Schröder 2016, 95). This study contributes to the literature on social entrepreneurship, social enterprises, and information systems by shedding light on the benefits and challenges associated with using online communities in the context of social enterprises. Moreover, this research addresses recent calls for more studies to understand how participation of different stakeholders can support value co-creation for SEs and how to facilitate interactions between different stakeholders (Ge, Xu, and Pellegrini 2019; Luisa and Magdalena 2017). In addition to these contributions, this study contributes to the theoretical knowledge on value co-creation by addressing a call for more research on understanding the role of multiple actors in value co-creation in different contexts (Kleinaltenkamp et al. 2012; Reypens, Lievens, and Blazevic
Similarly, this article addresses another call for research is in line with the need to investigate the ways organisations can manage their network of stakeholders and capture value from the “fit” between various capabilities that each stakeholder can offer during co-creation activities (Kazadi, Lievens, and Mahr 2016).

Limitations and future research suggestions

This empirical research has three limitations. To begin with, this is a single study which needs to be validated by other studies and research approaches. Due to the limited resources and time, the authors only conducted a qualitative interview research. In addition, this study has a small size, which can lead to a lack of generalising the results of this research to an entire population of actors, SEs in particular, in the ecosystem of SEs. Moreover, the authors included Facebook Groups only in this study as OCs, which can be another limitation for this study as there might be other benefits and challenges that can be identified in other OCs.

Based on the limitations of this study, future researchers can validate the results of this study by conducting quantitative research and/or other qualitative research approaches. Furthermore, it is recommended that other researchers can conduct more research with larger population with covering various types of actors in more OCs dedicated to SEs. Future research can also explore other online platforms to understand the benefits and challenges associated with using different online platforms in the ecosystem of SEs.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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