Social tech startups and entrepreneurial marketing. A multi-case analysis.

Abstract :

This study investigates how social tech startups (STSs) enact the dimensions of entrepreneurial marketing (EM) to address structural liabilities, pursue their dual mission, and achieve legitimacy throughout their lifecycle. Drawing on a qualitative multi-case analysis of 10 Italian STSs, this study reveals that EM in STSs functions as an integrated system of action, with dimensions grouped into two subsystems: one targeting market creation and value delivery, the other focused on securing legitimacy and access amid institutional voids. The study contributes to EM theory by highlighting the role of legitimacy building, regulatory engagement, and adaptive learning across lifecycle stages. It also provides practical implications for STS founders, investors, and policymakers seeking to foster socially impactful innovation.

Key words: *Entrepreneurial marketing; Social tech startups; Startup liabilities; Legitimacy, Startup lifecycle*

> Costanza Nosi
Associate Professor
Department of Human Studies, LUMSA University (Rome, Italy)
Mail. c.nosi@lumsa.it

> Niccolò Piccioni*
Postdoctoral Fellow
Department of Communication and Social Research, Sapienza University of Rome (Rome, Italy)

> Simona D'Amico
Research Fellow
Department of Law and Economics, UnitelmaSapienza University of Rome (Rome, Italy)
Mail. simona.damico@unitelmasapienza.it

**Corresponding Author: Mail. niccolo.piccioni@uniroma1.it*

INTRODUCTION

Startups are increasingly recognized as drivers of innovation, economic growth, and social transformation worldwide (OECD 2025). Among them, STSs—hybrid ventures that combine advanced technologies with socially oriented missions—are drawing increasing interest from scholars, practitioners, and policymakers for their potential to address pressing societal challenges while scaling sustainable business models (Grassi and Toschi 2024). STSs play a crucial role in the sustainable transition of contemporary economies thanks to their strong innovative capacity, which fosters the development of technologies, products, and services addressing urgent environmental and social challenges (Sehnem et al. 2022). Their agility enables them to rapidly adapt, experiment, and introduce disruptive solutions, thereby accelerating the diffusion of sustainable practices and alternatives to unsustainable models (Gionfriddo and Piccaluga 2024).

Despite their economic and social significance, STSs face multiple liabilities associated with their hybrid identity and early-stage development, which hinder their marketing practices throughout their lifecycle (Bandyopadhyay and Ray 2019). Beyond the well-known liabilities of newness and smallness (Aldrich and Auster 1986; Stinchcombe 1965), they also contend with outsidership, foreignness, and, crucially, hybridity (Guercini and Milanesi 2016). The latter arises when ventures pursue both social and commercial goals, triggering stakeholder skepticism regarding mission authenticity, conflicting value logics, and challenges in accessing conventional investors (Battilana and Lee 2014; Doherty, Haugh, and Lyon 2014).

In this demanding environment, EM—an opportunity-driven and innovation-oriented approach to marketing, characterized by proactiveness, calculated risk-taking, and resource leveraging, especially in uncertain or resource-constrained environments (Morris, Schindehutte, and LaForge 2002)—offers a valuable strategic lens for hybrid ventures confronting structural limitations (Nascimento et al. 2021). Nevertheless, while EM has been explored in social enterprises to support stakeholder engagement and market positioning (Asgari Ghods 2017) and studied in high-tech startups for its ability to build legitimacy and customer orientation (Chorev and Anderson 2006), its application at the intersection of these domains remains underdeveloped.

Accordingly, the present study investigates how EM dimensions are enacted within STSs across different lifecycle stages and how these practices help address structural liabilities and advance dual mission achievement, focusing on the Italian context as a particularly relevant setting for observing these dynamics. The number of Italian startups integrating a clear social or environmental mission has grown steadily, reaching 640 in 2024—an increase of 9% over the previous year—despite a 9% decline in the overall startup population during the same period (Social Innovation Monitor 2024; Il Sole 24 Ore 2025). This trend highlights the vitality of the STS segment within an ecosystem that nevertheless remains structurally demanding. Italy faces limited venture capital availability (P101 2025), weak technology transfer from public research (Abramo and D'Angelo 2009), and institutional inefficiencies in policy implementation (OECD 2018). Regulatory complexity, uneven digital infrastructure, and modest public support further constrain startup scalability (OECD 2025; European Commission 2025). These conditions compel ventures to compete based on their own initiative, making EM's emphasis on resource leveraging, proactiveness, and opportunity focus particularly salient.

LITERATURE REVIEW

EM is a market-oriented approach that lies at the intersection of marketing and entrepreneurship, focusing on a firm's ability to identify and seize market opportunities to drive sustainable and profitable growth (Morris, Schindehutte, and LaForge 2002; Risitano et al. 2025). Unlike traditional marketing, which is grounded in assumptions of rationality and formal planning (Stokes 2000), EM is particularly relevant in contexts where marketing decisions are made informally (Neill and Dang 2025), and the founders' intuition and actions are decisive for the company's success (Aryadita, Sukoco, and Lyver 2023).

According to Morris, Schindehutte, and LaForge (2002), EM is characterized by seven core dimensions. Opportunity focus involves identifying and creating overlooked market gaps through creativity and alertness. Proactiveness reflects a forward-looking mindset, where firms anticipate market changes through strategic initiative. Customer intensity emphasizes building deep, dynamic, and value-driven relationships with customers. Innovativeness highlights the continuous generation and application of novel ideas to offerings and marketing practices. Calculated risk-taking refers to the capacity to assess potential risks and minimize market uncertainty. Resource leveraging captures the creative use of limited resources to overcome constraints and drive innovation. Finally, value creation centers on generating unique, customer-focused value by recombining resources in innovative ways. These EM dimensions have been predominantly examined within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (e.g., Astuti and Balqiah 2020), while research focusing on startups—a subset of SMEs characterized by innovative business models and rapid growth—remains comparatively scarce (Breit and Volkmann 2025). EM is particularly relevant in the startup context, as such ventures, in addition to facing

resource constraints, are exposed to multiple liabilities that can undermine their legitimacy and growth prospects (Albano and Lubello 2018; Fisher 2020; Guercini and Milanesi 2016). Among these, the liabilities of newness and smallness are two of the most widely recognized challenges faced by startups (Aldrich and Auster 1986; Stinchcombe 1965). The former refers to the absence of established routines, organizational cohesion, and external legitimacy, making it difficult for new ventures to gain stakeholder trust and secure critical resources. The latter highlights structural vulnerabilities, such as limited financial and human capital and weak market power, which reduce the firm's resilience to environmental shocks. These challenges are further compounded in the case of innovative startups, which are especially prone to the liabilities of outsidership and foreignness due to their pioneering nature and frequent entry into uncharted markets or industries (Cavallo, Ghezzi, and Rossi-Lamastra 2021). Startups entering new sectors or engaging with unfamiliar stakeholder groups may face the liability of outsidership, that is, the disadvantage of not yet being embedded in relevant industry or institutional networks, which limits access to market information, reputation spillovers, and collaborative opportunities (Johanson and Vahlne 2009). Furthermore, in international contexts, startups may suffer from the liability of foreignness, which stems from institutional distance, lack of host market knowledge, and local stakeholder discrimination, thereby increasing the costs and risks associated with cross-border operations (Zaheer 1995).

Within the innovative startup domain, growing attention from academics, professionals, and policymakers is being directed toward STSs (Arena, Azzone, and Bengo 2018), also referred to as "socio-tech ventures" (Scillitoe, Poonamallee, and Joy 2018) or "technology social ventures" (Grassi and Toschi 2024). These are hybrid organizations that combine the dual demands of social impact and financial sustainability with the development and deployment of advanced technological solutions (Lehner and Nicholls 2014). Unlike social enterprises, which pursue social objectives by reinvesting profits and creating wealth for collective benefit (Bandyopadhyay and Ray 2019), STSs prioritize rapid scaling and superior financial and economic performance (Singaram, Radu-Lefebvre, and Gartner 2023). They also leverage frontier technologies, such as artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, and biotechnology, to address entrenched societal challenges and foster the diffusion of social innovation (Nascimento et al. 2021). The simultaneous pursuit of profit and market growth alongside collective value creation and social innovation through advanced technologies gives rise to significant strategic and operational tensions (Doherty, Haugh, and Lyon 2014). To enhance their impact and attract investors and customers, STSs must grow their market presence while carefully balancing the appeal of their innovative solutions with the ethical accountability expected within a broader stakeholder ecosystem (Mitchell, Madill, and Chreim 2016). As a result, these organizations encounter an additional form of liability—the liability of hybridity—which, when combined with other existing liabilities, further amplifies the complexity that STSs must navigate across all stages of their lifecycle (Picken 2017). In pursuing both social and commercial goals, STSs often encounter stakeholder skepticism about the authenticity of their mission, face internal tensions between logics, and struggle to attract conventional investors or customers who perceive their dual purpose as ambiguous or inconsistent (Battilana and Lee 2014).

Given the considerable organizational and functional conflicts that characterize STSs, EM offers a valuable lens for understanding how these ventures respond to the distinctive challenges associated with their hybrid nature and vulnerability throughout their lifecycle. However, while EM has been studied in social enterprises—where it supports market positioning, resource mobilization, and stakeholder engagement (Asgari Ghods 2019)—and in high-tech startups—where it contributes to legitimacy building, customer focus, and adaptive risk-taking (Marcon and Riveiro 2021)—the intersection of these two domains remains largely underexplored. Therefore, exploring EM in the context of STSs offers a promising avenue for research, with the potential to advance both conceptual understanding and managerial practice.

Against this backdrop, the present research aims to address the following research question: *How are the EM dimensions enacted in STSs to address liabilities, pursue their dual mission, and achieve legitimacy throughout their lifecycle?*

METHOD

The study adopted a qualitative multi-case research design, which enables the identification of recurring patterns across heterogeneous real-world contexts and supports analytical rather than statistical generalization (Yin 2012). A purposive sample of Italian STSs was selected from the Social Innovation Monitor – SIM (2021), which annually identifies the 15 highest-performing ventures in terms of innovation and social/environmental impact. The selection criteria included the following:

(i) Establishment within the previous five years (as of 2020 end)
(ii) Compliance with Italian legal requirements for innovative startups
(iii) Independence from parent organizations (i.e., not corporate spin-offs)
(iv) Strong technological orientation and/or innovative business models
(v) Exclusion of cooperatives and consortia
(vi) Operational status with an active digital presence

All 15 ventures selected by the SIM were contacted and invited to participate in the study. Of these, 10 agreed to take part, thereby constituting the final empirical sample. The final sample encompasses a variety of manufacturing and service sectors, ensuring heterogeneity consistent with the standards of qualitative multi-case research (Neill and Dang 2025). Detailed case profiles are presented in Table 1. To ensure anonymity of the companies and respondents, we used sequential letters to identify the companies (column "#" in Table 1) and an alphanumeric code to identify the respondents (I1, I2, I3, and so forth, column "Respondent code and role" in Table 1). The total number of respondents is 11 because, for company E, both the Founder and CEO and the Marketing Director were interviewed.

Table 1
Investigated startups. Authors' elaboration.

#	Foundation year	Main aim	Business	Life-cycle stage	Sales	Employees	Patents	SDGs	Respondent code and role
A	2017	Provide energy from renewable sources to businesses and households.	B2B and B2C	Scale-up	3.716-5.000M	0-2	No	7	I1 (Founder and CEO)
B	2019	Enable the reduction of costs and environmental impact by providing technological solutions for precision agriculture.	B2B	Startup	0-108k	3-4	No	6; 12	I2 (Marketing director)
C	2017	Produce sustainable footwear using eco-friendly materials, implement waste reduction solutions, and provide consultancy services on sustainability in the fashion industry.	B2B and B2C	Scale-up	2.000-2.741M	n.a.	No	12	I3 (Founder and CEO)
D	2016	Produce photovoltaic glazing in buildings that collect and distribute energy made from renewable sources.	B2B	Scale-up	0-108k	7-9	Own	7; 11	I4 (Founder and CEO)

E	2018	Provide a bionic prosthesis, a functional and accessible device that aims to improve the mental and physical well-being of upper limb amputees by supporting them in all the most important actions of daily life.	B2B	Startup	1.437-2.000M	0-2	Own	3; 13	I5 (Marketing director) I6 (Founder and CEO)
F	2018	Help reduce the environmental impact of electronic devices by putting them back into the used and regenerated market and revitalize neighborhood phone stores.	B2B and B2C	Startup	2.000-2.741M	0-2	No	12	I7 (Founder and CEO)
G	2017	Promote the use of innovative technologies for water treatment, purification, and reuse.	B2B	Startup	2.000-2.741M	5-6	No	12	I8 (Founder and CEO)
H	2016	Enhance patient care by utilizing robotics to develop rehabilitation and diagnostic tools.	B2B	Startup	2.741-3.716M	31-38	Own	3	I9 (Founder and Marketing Director)
I	2016	Allow beekeepers to diagnose the occurrence of anomalous diseases in their bees in advance, thus enabling the implementation of targeted and effective treatments.	B2B	Startup	108k-271k	10-13	No	8; 15	I10 (Founder and CEO)
L	2018	Contribute to the transition from polymers derived from fossil sources to biopolymers, predominantly in the food packaging sector.	B2B	Startup	1.437-2.000M	0-2	No	10; 2	I11 (Marketing director)

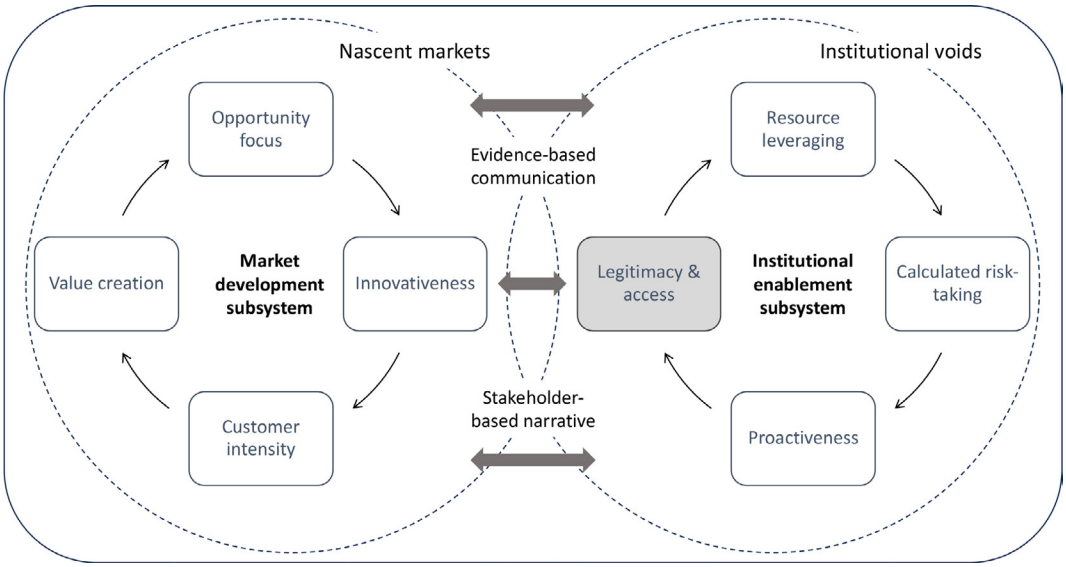
In-depth interviews were conducted with the 11 key informants, offering retrospective insights into the evolution of EM practices (Fuller, Lombardini, and Poggi 2024). The protocol addressed company history, founding motivations, lifecycle stage, marketing practices, technological capabilities, and funding sources. Interviews (lasting 45–110 minutes) were recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), combining a deductive coding scheme based on EM dimensions and startup liabilities with inductive codes capturing emergent themes related to the configuration, interrelations, and temporal emphasis of these dimensions. Abductive reasoning guided the iterative interplay between theory and data (Thompson 2022). Moreover, transcripts were independently coded, with discrepancies resolved through discussion. Given the retrospective nature of the interviews, lifecycle-related patterns should be interpreted as perceived shifts in emphasis over time, rather than as deterministic or sequential stages. Triangulation with secondary sources (industry reports, websites, online platforms) enhanced validity and confirmed consistency across data sources (Carter et al. 2014).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that EM dimensions in STSs operate as an integrated system of action that enables ventures to navigate both market and institutional challenges. In addition to operating in nascent markets, STSs face institutional voids—not merely due to unmet social needs, but due to a misalignment between rapid technological innovation and the slower pace of regulatory adaptation. Consequently, even when ready to commercialize advanced solutions, STSs are often constrained by the absence of clear rules. In this context, legitimacy—gained through compliance with norms and institutional expectations—becomes a prerequisite for accessing markets. Therefore, part of the EM effort is directed toward establishing the venture as a legitimate actor.

Figure 1 illustrates two interconnected subsystems that reflect how EM dimensions are configured in response to distinct environments: A market development subsystem, where opportunity focus, innovativeness, customer intensity, and value creation are used to craft and deliver the offering; and an institutional enablement subsystem, where resource leveraging, calculated risk-taking, and proactiveness address institutional barriers to entry. Across both domains, evidence-based communication and a stakeholder-oriented narrative are key tools for building credibility and fostering engagement. Within this framework, legitimacy and access function as essential enabling conditions for launching and scaling operations.

Figure 1
The EM system in STSs. Authors' elaboration.



Market development subsystem

STSs operate in newly forming markets with high potential for rapid growth and a lack of established competition. However, these markets are characterized by high uncertainty and unclear product definitions, which shape how these enterprises craft and execute their marketing actions. In the pre-startup phase, the way entrepreneurs identify opportunities—opportunity focus—is closely tied to their social mission that they pursue, aware that profit generation is necessary for the venture to survive and make a genuine contribution to improving society, as I6 underlined: "*If your value can be expressed as something that delivers an added benefit to society—while never losing sight of the need to achieve economic sustainability eventually—there will come a point when that value can be translated into, and captured by, the business model.*" To detect unaddressed needs, founders primarily rely on the knowledge and skills acquired through their educational background and professional experience, as well as on their personal network of relationships. As claimed by I2, "*We have never conducted very specific, highly targeted marketing research (…). First, because—fortunately—we come from this sector. [And also] we pick up on trends through networking and professional contacts.*" However, identifying social or environmental issues does not automatically produce a viable business idea. For the opportunity to materialize, founders must transform their mission into a concrete and manageable offering that can be effectively positioned and marketed: "*It is not enough to invent a new technology; to achieve innovation, it must also be developed and brought to market*" (I4).

At this stage, innovativeness plays a crucial role, as it provides the foundation for identifying novel solutions that enable the design of offerings capable of addressing the identified needs. Innovativeness extends beyond the creation of a new artifact or technology; it also involves developing activities and tools that make the innovation understandable and credible in the eyes of external stakeholders, particularly potential customers, partners, and investors. Because of their hybridity, inherent newness, and reliance on advanced technologies, STSs often operate in contexts marked by skepticism. Securing legitimacy in such environments requires presenting their offering in a manner that is both credible and comprehensible. This is typically achieved through evidence-based communication—such as building prototypes and demonstrating their functioning, disseminating analytics, or ensuring traceability—and by adopting accessible communicative codes that allow non-expert audiences to grasp the scope and distinctive features of the innovation: "*It is essential to communicate clearly what one does while, at the same time, providing scientific grounding and authoritative references. [One must] choose carefully what to say because physicians require clinical studies and references, and they cannot adopt a technology without supporting scientific data. (…) Then, our number one rule is to describe and explain what we do in a way that is easy to understand"* (I5).

Innovativeness directly paves the way for customer intensity and value creation: Once the novel solution becomes visible and interpretable, users and partners can engage with it, provide feedback, and contribute to continuous improvement. From the pre-startup phase, customer relationships serve as the key channel for systematically refining the offering and driving ongoing product development, as claimed by I3: "*It is the consumer who tells you what they want. [You have to] experiment, test, read the data, course-correct, and get to the point.*"

In the enterprise's growth phase, this mechanism intensifies: STSs become increasingly innovative and competitive by adopting more formalized market-listening tools, leveraging customer feedback, and responding rapidly to requests for product modification, integration, and improvement. In this way, customer intensity and innovativeness reinforce each other, generating a virtuous learning loop in which insights from user interactions inform the next wave of innovations, and those innovations are released to the market quickly—often in beta form—to obtain immediate feedback, promptly correct errors, and enhance the offering. I2 describes this process: "*We tend to release products before they are finished. Then we observe [customers'] reactions and requests and, based on what we learn, decide which products to prioritize in development.*"

Value creation is closely tied to the building and enhancement of customer relationships and reflects how those relationships evolve. In the early stage of the STS, value creation is primarily mission-driven: Value is framed as the venture's anticipated contribution to societal well-being and the resolution of unmet needs through advanced technology. Communication focuses on the venture's social intent and mobilizes recognition and support from customers and investors, as emphasized by I6 *"[Our main investor] saw in this technology a prospect of social impact that was paramount. (…) Pursuing social objectives was the driver of his investment. He fell in love with the idea."* As the firm grows, value becomes concrete, materializing in measurable outputs and outcomes that demonstrate technical effectiveness and user utility, alongside economic and social sustainability. I3 explained, "*If I create a system that lets you keep the sole [of our shoes] and swap the upper to your taste, then each time you change an upper, you save a sole. So, you effectively save 8–10 kg of* CO_2." In this shift, the narrative remains relevant but becomes evidence based, and market proof becomes an integral component of the value proposition. As the venture scales, value creation also progresses from single-segment problem-solving to portfolio-level market development. STSs redeploy the core solution to adjacent customer segments and other value-chain actors, thereby enlarging the addressable market and triggering a subsequent phase of opportunity focus,

as claimed by I10: *"Then we scaled the business model. (…) We realized that the beekeeper is only the final step in the value chain. Thus, we decided to sell to the beekeeper's customers, to companies, and to anyone seeking to invest in biodiversity."*

Institutional enablement subsystem

While the market development subsystem shows how opportunities become legible and adoptable, in STSs, the institutional side is equally decisive. This is because entrepreneurs operate in environments where rules, standards, and intermediaries are often thin or still evolving. Under such conditions, a primary challenge is gaining legitimacy and recognition from external stakeholders. The institutional enablement subsystem portrays how entrepreneurs handle these challenges through resource leveraging, calculated risk-taking, and proactiveness oriented to legitimacy and access.
In the early stage, beyond material and financial inputs, founders' human capital (prior knowledge and domain expertise) and social capital (personal and professional networks) constitute the most significant resources for institutional enablement. These endowments are actively mobilized (resource leveraging) to convert a novel idea into externally recognized legitimacy, thereby reducing the liability of outsidership. Founders leverage trusted contacts to secure pilot sites, endorsements, and specialized know-how, as clearly explained by I2, who stated, *"We did this because I have a background (…) and a strong network of people to involve. This helped us a great deal in building trust; we needed someone to act as an ambassador for this new way of doing agriculture and using technological tools."* Once a stable base of trust is constructed, relationships with external stakeholders tend to formalize. Ventures' informal ties turn into structured partnerships with other firms—including large multinationals—as well as with universities, research centers, and professional communities. In parallel, STSs accumulate visible markers of legitimacy and access, such as certifications, awards, and success in competitions and public tenders. Over time, the mechanism is reversed: It is no longer the STS that seeks cooperation with other actors to enhance its own credibility, but rather it becomes a source of credibility for its partners: *"Today, we have signed 28 partnerships. These are not just collaborations, but true co-brandings where the [other] brand wants us to be visible because consumers recognize us as the ones bringing sustainability"* (I3). In this perspective, calculated risk-taking centers on assessing regulatory and institutional risks that may hinder business activity, ranging from non-compliance with existing laws to the uncertainty created by regulatory voids. As I4 stressed, *"Breaking into these markets takes a long time (…) a strong ability to build relationships (…) and, above all, the ability to identify and study the regulations in these various markets."* An additional risk concerns the possibility of mispositioning the product, particularly in sectors where policies shape demand and adoption. As I9 noted, *"The market is fragmented; it is important to know all the reimbursement policies in each country in order to understand how to position the [medical] devices."* Risk-taking is therefore "calculated" because it is guided by the careful evaluation of institutional requirements and the conditions for market entry.

This calculated orientation directly intersects with proactiveness: The same institutional voids and fragmented policies that heighten regulatory risk also redefine how anticipation unfolds. Rather than merely anticipating or shaping demand, founders encounter a different challenge: The high degree of technological innovation aimed at pursuing a social goal often clashes with regulatory gaps. As I1 explained, *"The regulation is still evolving … it is unclear. We have everything ready, but we are waiting for the regulation to be fully defined."* Proactiveness therefore extends beyond the market domain, pushing entrepreneurs to engage in the construction of regulatory and institutional legitimacy before commercial action is possible (legitimacy and access). This becomes even more evident in foreign market entry, where stringent local requirements often constrain anticipatory behavior. As I4 recalled, *"I went to sell in Miami, [but there] the regulations for installing glass walls require hurricane-resistant certification. (…) So, to sell there, you need a partner from Miami; otherwise, you won't get anywhere."* In this sense, proactiveness does not merely coincide with the anticipation of market change but also stimulates new regulatory and social arrangements across both domestic and international contexts.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study advances the theoretical understanding of EM in STSs in several ways. First, it introduces a dual-system configuration of EM dimensions that reflects the need to address two distinct, yet interrelated sets of challenges related to market uncertainty and institutional voids. Rather than functioning as isolated levers, EM dimensions coalesce into two interdependent subsystems—market development and institutional enablement—each activated by specific environmental challenges. This systemic configuration reframes EM not merely as a unidirectional, market-facing orientation (Morris, Schindehutte, and LaForge 2002), but as a multi-dimensional capability system through which hybrid ventures adapt to uncertain market conditions and evolving institutional landscapes. Second, the findings contribute to a theoretical re-specification of specific EM dimensions. Traditionally associated with anticipating customer needs or managing commercial risk (Morris, Schindehutte, and LaForge 2002; Risitano et al. 2025), proactiveness and calculated

risk-taking are shown to acquire new functions in STSs: They enable ventures to confront the challenges of hybridity and institutional incompleteness, not just market dynamism. In this light, EM practices extend beyond demand generation to include institutional signaling, regulatory navigation, and ecosystem alignment, thus broadening the conceptual boundaries of EM in hybrid innovation contexts. Third, the study advances a more central role for legitimacy and access in EM theory. Rather than emerging as a by-product of growth, legitimacy is actively constructed and strategically reinforced across different phases of the startup lifecycle, as informants retrospectively described. In early phases, STSs build legitimacy through resource leveraging, relational endorsements, and evidence-based communication. Over time, this legitimacy accumulates into an organizational asset that enhances access and stakeholder trust. This finding aligns with the social enterprise literature (Bandyopadhyay and Ray 2019) and contributes to EM theory by positioning legitimacy not as a static outcome but as a dynamic capability (Teece 2007). In this view, legitimacy building entails a routinized and adaptive set of practices—such as producing evidence, mobilizing networks, and influencing regulation—that enable STSs to address uncertainty, secure access, and reinforce their hybrid value proposition. Fourth, the study deepens the understanding of institutional voids by showing that they are not exclusive to emerging markets (Gao et al. 2017) but also constrain innovative ventures in advanced economies. Here, voids stem from a misalignment between fast-paced technological innovation and the slower evolution of regulatory frameworks (Frimpong, 2025). This mismatch creates normative uncertainty that can block adoption or delay commercialization. In this context, EM provides tools for managing market uncertainty and, at the same time, a means of institutional navigation, allowing STSs to act as institutional entrepreneurs and societal changemakers (Nascimento et al. 2021). Finally, the study foregrounds the temporal and iterative nature of EM in STSs. Across the venture lifecycle, EM dimensions are continually recalibrated in response to shifting constraints. Boundary objects such as prototypes, clinical trials, environmental metrics, and traceability systems function as translational devices that bridge market and institutional domains, enabling stakeholders to evaluate innovation despite uncertainty. This underscores EM not as a fixed trait but as a dynamic process of strategic learning, stakeholder alignment, and legitimacy construction over time.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The study reveals valuable managerial implications for STS founders, investors, and policymakers. Founders should treat EM as a dual-purpose system aimed at engaging customers and addressing regulatory uncertainty. EM dimensions should be strategically aligned with both market demands and institutional constraints. Early investments in legitimacy—through stakeholder engagement and evidence-based communication—are crucial for overcoming skepticism and gaining access. Customer interactions should be leveraged to refine the offering and build credibility and trust in new markets. Impact investors should assess EM capabilities beyond commercial traction, focusing on how ventures generate institutional alignment and stakeholder legitimacy. Support should extend beyond funding to include reputational endorsement, strategic connections, and guidance on regulatory engagement. These forms of non-financial capital are often pivotal for STSs facing institutional voids. In this context, policymakers should reduce normative uncertainty by establishing clearer frameworks and providing advisory support. Furthermore, public programs can accelerate adoption by rewarding ventures that demonstrate credible signaling and co-develop solutions aligned with societal goals. Acting as ecosystem enablers—rather than gatekeepers—will facilitate the scaling of socially impactful innovation.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH AVENUES

This study has limitations that open avenues for future research. First, it relies on an exploratory multi-case analysis of 10 Italian STSs. Broader generalizability could be achieved by increasing sample size, including cases from other countries and comparing STSs with non-STSs to identify specificities and divergences. Second, the study is based on in-depth interviews, which provide rich but time-bound insights. Future research could use longitudinal designs to assess whether EM development in STSs follows distinctive or unexpected trajectories. Third, while this study examines all seven EM dimensions to offer a holistic view, further work could focus on individual dimensions to develop more fine-grained theoretical insights.

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